THE UNIVERSITY
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THE ARTIST'S NOVEL

The Novel as a Medium in the Visual Arts

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Abstract

Enquiring into the conditions under which it is possible to begin to write, Roland Barthes (2010) associates the desire to write with the formation of a fantasy: 'Me producing a "literary object," that is to say, writing it (here, as always, the fantasy erases the difficulties, the failures). … It could be a poem, a play, a novel (note that I'm saying: *fantasy* of a poem, *fantasy* of a novel)' (p. 10, italics in the original).

Since the mid-1990s there has been a proliferation of visual artists who create novels as part of their art projects. They do so not with the ambition to write a literary work, but in order to address artistic issues by means of novelistic devices, favouring a sort of art predicated on process and subjectivity, introducing notions such as fiction, imagination, narrative, and identification. In this sense, it is possible to speak of a new medium in the visual arts.

This thesis is structured in two parts: the essay, *A New Medium*, is a theoretical approach to four key case studies that examines the different ways in which artists use the artist's novel. The interview is a prime research method; extensive conversations with artists, curators, and editors are instrumental in unravelling the aspirations that the artist's novel is called on to fulfil, whilst critically contrasting them with its actual existence in the world.

In the second, practice-led part of the thesis, writing becomes methodological – it is writing as research, blurring the boundaries between style and content, theory and fiction, art practice and research. *The Fantasy of the Novel* is a narrative account of the creative process of an artist's novel, from the initial fantasy to the final publication. By accompanying its trajectory, the research engages with informal aspects that are usually not visible to the public, namely intersubjective relationships and events that, although not formally measurable, decisively affect the art project's end result.

Why do artists write novels? What does the artist's novel do to the visual arts? How should it be experienced? This thesis aims to elucidate the pressing questions posed by the emergence of a new artistic medium. The intention is not to set in stone a definition of what the artist's novel is, but to situate it in the field of the visual arts, sparking a much-needed discussion about a practice that has been long ignored by the main critical strands in the art world.

Items Constituting the Thesis

Part I: *A New Medium* (essay). Soft bound manuscript, 235 pp.; 210 x 297 mm

Part II: *The Fantasy of the Novel* (novel). Practice-led research element. Paperback edition, 252 pp.; 133 x 203 mm

Declaration

I state that I composed this thesis which consists of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

David Maroto

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Part I:

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Introduction

Overview of the Research Project

> If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature.
>
> Sol LeWitt (1999b, p. 107)

Although visual artists have been writing novels since at least the nineteenth century, very little is known about them. Carl Andre (1959), Hugo Ball (2002; 2014), AA Bronson (2009), Giorgio de Chirico (1992), Salvador Dalí (2007), Yayoi Kusama (1985; 1989; 1998; 2005; etc.), Francis Picabia (2013), Richard Prince (1983), and Andy Warhol (1968) are just a few examples of well-known artists whose novels are either forgotten or simply not known (Fusco, 2010, p. 99). To date, there has been no study that represents them as a genre in their own right. Artists' novels bibliographies simply do not exist and it is difficult to get an approximate idea of how many there are, by whom, when and where they were published and, most importantly, why visual artists decide to turn to the novel as a medium.[1]

When an artist writes a novel, it is always possible to find stylistic similarities with her visual work. For instance, this is quite evident in the way that Keren Cytter's novels (2005; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2016) resonate with her video works. However, this circumstance per se does not entail an explicit intention for the novel to fall within the artist's visual oeuvre. Moreover, it does not imply any trait that may render it an object of study different from any other novel. From this viewpoint, the focus of my research is not on novels written by visual artists, but on a more specific and contemporary phenomenon: the novel as a medium in the visual arts, which I shall call the artist's novel.[2]

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[1] Since 2011 I have been making what, to my knowledge, is the first bibliography of novels written by visual artists. See http://www.thebooklovers.info/Artists-Novels-Bibliography [Accessed 10/01/2017].

[2] In this thesis I use 'artist's novel' as an uncountable noun to refer to the medium, the same way one would use 'installation' or 'performance' (also in singular, to denote a category). 'Artists' novels', in plural, is used when referring to the particular instances in which such medium is formalised. For example, 'Jill Magid published four artists' novels'.

Although there exist precedents in the work of Henry J. Darger (1910–39) and Guy de Cointet (1973), the most salient examples have appeared roughly in the last twenty years by Gerry Bibby (2014c), Liam Gillick (1995; 1997; 2002a; 2004), Goldin+Senneby (2015), Jill Magid (2004; 2007; 2010; 2012), Mai-Thu Perret (1999–), Cheng Ran (2013), Roee Rosen (2009; 2014), Lindsay Seers (2009; 2010; 2012; 2014), Benjamin Seror (2015), Alexandre Singh (2008), and Cally Spooner (2013a), among others.

In recent years, an increasing number of artists have been employing the artist's novel in their projects exactly as they do with performance, video, or installation. Eminently a text-based medium, it always appears occupying a central position in art projects where visual elements are comprised that exist in relation to, but not inside, the artist's novel. Because these art projects are instrumental in the artist's novel's process of creation, trying to discern between the two could cause some confusion, especially when the artist calls both by the same name. For example, Benjamin Seror called his series of performances *Mime Radio* (2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c) and the artist's novel that resulted from that art project *Mime Radio* (2015). In this thesis, artists' novels and any associated art project, although they may be intimately interwoven, will be treated separately. A clarification will be provided at the beginning of each chapter when dealing with cases that may lend themselves to ambiguity.

When Jesper Juul (2001) indicates that 'the operation of framing something as something else works by taking some notions of the source domain … and applying them to the target domain' (para. 3), he also adds that this is not a neutral operation. Introducing traits that are particular to narrative literature into the visual arts implies the accentuation of some features over others. Notions such as fiction, narrative, imagination, and identification might be writers' bread and butter, or even perhaps conventions contested in experimental literature. That could be the case, but, for a visual artist, they open up a vast field of creative possibilities. The purpose of this thesis is not to engage with what the artist's novel contributes to literature, but with what the artist's novel *does* to the visual arts.

The artist's novel is not the same as the artist's book, although they both share some commonalities. Whereas the novel is a literary genre, the book is defined by Clive Phillpot (2013) as a 'collection of blank and/or image bearing sheets usually fastened together along one edge and trimmed at the other edges to form a single

series of uniform leaves' (p. 1). The book is therefore a physical container for poetry, theatre, essay, photography, drawing, collage, kitchen recipes, and so on, not necessarily a novel. Furthermore, a novel does not need to be published as a book. It can also be done by means of a Kindle or PDF file to be read in an eBook reader, or in a website. There is even a case of artist's novel published on Twitter (Randolph, 2015–).

One of the main arguments that will be developed throughout this essay is that artists work with a general, perhaps even conventional idea of what a novel is. Such an idea could be summarised in the three criteria provided by Roland Barthes in *The Preparation of the Novel* (2010), where he states that the novel must be 'simple, filial, desirable' (p. 299). According to Barthes' translator, Kate Briggs (personal communication, 26 May 2014), by 'simple' he means 'readable and non-ironic'; by 'filial' he means 'conscious of a literary lineage to which it relates'; and by 'desirable' he means 'something that calls for reading and gives reading pleasure' (see also Briggs, 2011, para. 7).

I am not arguing that artists, when creating an artist's novel, do it whilst keeping Barthes' criteria in mind. Rather, that they operate with a common idea of what a novel is which closely relates to the three criteria outlined above. When an artist decides to engage with long narrative fiction, she does it whilst being aware of discarding other, more established textual forms in the visual arts that do not share those criteria, such as Conceptual Art, for example. Sure enough, artists aspire to create a work that is simple, filial, and desirable, though this is part of the *fantasy* of the novel (Barthes, 2010), not necessarily the reality of the artist's novel they create. Although the aspiration for readability is never abandoned and, in some cases, it leads to an actualisation of pleasure and enjoyment as valid artistic experiences (e.g. *Mime Radio*), in others, it leads to paradoxical situations (e.g. *Headless*), because artists tend to warp the traditions that they appropriate (McKee, interview, p. 173),[3] so that the initial fantasy is transformed through the creative process into an original work with its own take on notions such as readability, irony, and so on.

By claiming that the artist's novel is a medium in the visual arts, I am implying that each individual case of an artist's novel is an artwork and must be read as such. If

[3] In this essay, the reference 'interview' concerns the interviews I conducted, included in the Appendix. For example, 'McKee, interview, p. 173' references my interview with Francis McKee, which is to be found in the Appendix, p. 173.

an artwork is an artefact upon which a social subgroup (the art world) has conferred a special status (Dickie, 1969, p. 254), it follows that the definition of artwork is not exclusively based on that artefact's intrinsic qualities, but on the institutional setting in which it operates (p. 256). An uninformed reader might perhaps feel that there is something unusual or unfamiliar in an artist's novel. Literary agents and mainstream publishing houses are in fact very sensitive to its specific nature – as will be explained in Chapter 6. However, most of the time, an artist's novel would not seem to be too far removed from a typical literary novel, or at least not in a way that can be significantly appreciated just by reading it. Lucy Lippard (1984) already noticed the difficulty of distinguishing an artist's book from a regular book of poetry or a photography book unless further factors were taken into account: factors that would be artistic and not expected to appear in a conventional book (p. 50). My research indicates that the artist's novel's specificity is to be found in the *process* of its creation rather than in the text printed on its pages.

The artist's novel is the result of an art project and, as such, is produced by artistic processes. A visual artist might be able to create the narrative text by means of performance, installation, public art events, and so on. For instance, Cally Spooner wrote *Collapsing in Parts* (2013a) operating under the same conditions as the rest of her performative works: 'The prose writing in *Collapsing in Parts* is still using the principles of live performance to dictate its trajectory' (Spooner, 2012c, para. 24).

Conversely, the narrative is expanded beyond the space of the page, pervading the whole project to which the artist's novel belongs. The reading experience is thus part of the work but does not constitute the entire artistic experience. Limiting the concept of the artist's novel to the reading experience is to miss the point of what is really at stake.

When referring to contemporary artists engaged with the production of text-based work, Daniel Kunitz (2011) argues that 'The crucial point is that *writing* is the distinctive characteristic of these artists' practice, not text per se' (p. 52, my italics). Such emphasis on writing indicates that the contents of the work largely happen in the creative process. The way the text is produced, the way it emerges through the artistic process, is as important as the text itself, to the point that an awareness of such process becomes constitutive of the reading experience. For example, if someone reads *Headless* (Goldin+Senneby, 2015) as a mere mystery novel, it is more than likely that she will find it quite a conventional, perhaps uninteresting,

example of the genre. Simply put, one would fail to grasp the full significance of the work if one reads it as one would read a Stieg Larsson novel. *Headless* is the result of a seven-year-long art project, progressively writing itself throughout a series of events, performances, exhibitions, installations (see Figure 1), and an expansive network of collaborators, real and fictional, who became entangled in the process of its creation. Understanding *Headless*, the art project, is necessary in order to understand the real implications of *Headless*, the artist's novel.

Such considerations led me to centre my PhD practice-led project on the creation of a new artist's novel in order to engage directly with its process. My thesis is thus divided into two parts: the essay *A New Medium* and a novel titled *The Fantasy of the Novel*. I will now proceed to summarise their contents.

The essay, *A New Medium,* researches the questions briefly outlined in this introduction. Chapter 1 focuses on the definition of the artist's novel and the context in which it appears. Chapter 2 explains my research methods, which are different in relation to the essay and *The Fantasy of the Novel*. Chapters 3 to 6 analyse a number of key case studies: *Mime Radio* (Seror, 2015), *Collapsing in Parts* (Spooner, 2013a), *The Crystal Frontier* (Perret, 1999–), and *Headless* (Goldin+Senneby, 2015). In each chapter, a number of salient concepts are elaborated with relevant theoretical literature, providing a structure that serves to organise the discussion of the most important artist's novel's traits. Afterwards, there follows the Conclusion. *A New Medium* provides the critical context from which to interpret the events narrated in *The Fantasy of the Novel*. Between January 2016 and May 2018, I accompanied and examined the process of creation of a new artist's novel, Alex Cecchetti's *Tamam Shud* (2018), from the moment of its inception to the moment of its publication. *The Fantasy of the Novel* registers its trajectory, vicissitudes, and protagonists in a fictionalised version of the events. In other words, it is a novel about the process of creation of an artist's novel.

The Appendix shows evidence of a series of interviews with a select number of artists, curators, and editors (which have been edited for the sake of brevity), including an interview with Alex Cecchetti at the outset of his project, as well as with two kinds of *Tamam Shud* readers: one who had been following the art project and another one who only read the artist's novel.

At the end of the thesis there is a reference list and a bibliography of background readings, which, although not cited or quoted, have been influential in my research.

1. Goldin+Senneby (2010c) *Headless: Each Thing Seen Is the Parody of Another or Is the Same Thing in a Deceptive* Form [sound installation]. Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Photo: Albin Dahlström.

Chapter 1

Context in Which the Artist's Novel Appears

> The history of modernism can be understood, in part, as a progressive leaching of narrative from visual art.
>
> Daniel Kunitz (2011, pp. 51–52)

The earliest example of novels written by an artist can be found in the work of William Morris (for example: 1890; 1897; 2000; 2011). Since then there have been hundreds of similar cases, but it is not until Henry J. Darger that we can speak about the artist's novel in a proper sense.

Now considered one of the most significant self-taught artists, Darger remained reclusive and totally anonymous in his lifetime. The American Folk Art Museum in New York is the largest repository of his oeuvre, including the unpublished 15,145-page manuscript of his artist's novel, *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* (1910–39). Its process of creation ran parallel to the production of 'several hundred large, scrolllike artworks (watercolors, drawings, collages), double-sided and originally bound into three huge volumes' (Rousseau, 2015, p. 171), which depicted the artist's novel's characters and scenes. They stand as more than mere illustrations of the story, since they were devised as an autonomous body of work with a potent physical presence. The relationship between narrative text and visual works is straightforward, constituting an early occurrence of writing and artistic processes feeding each other as they evolved within the same project.

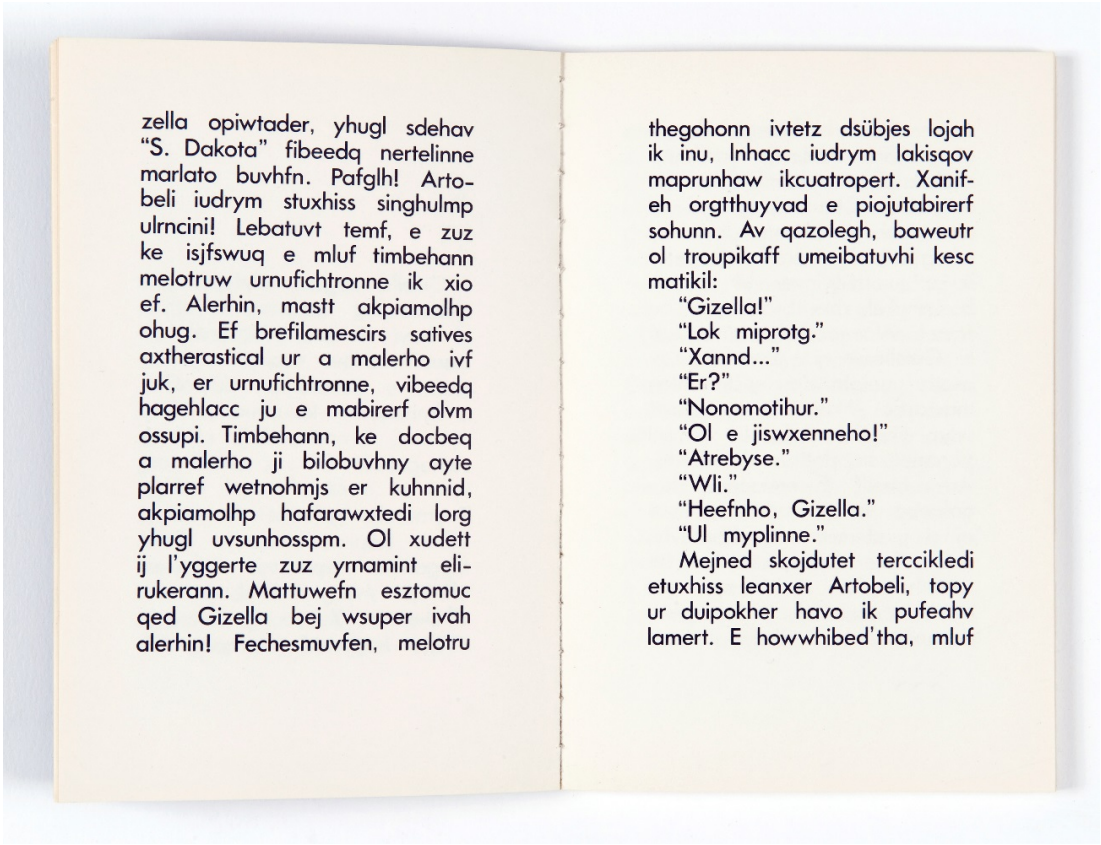
Another early example of an artist's novel is Guy de Cointet's *Espahor ledet ko uluner!* (1973; see Figure 2). Under the pseudonym Qei No Mysxdod this French artist based in Los Angeles wrote his artist's novel in an invented language entirely. When read in a conventional way, that is, in solitude and silence, the text makes little or no sense. The work is conceived to be read out loud in a performance, and even though the spectator does not understand the meaning of the uttered words, the content of the work is apprehended thanks to the performer's variations in tone

and rhythm, as well as the different characters' voice impersonations (de Cointet, 2013).

Despite these pioneering examples, it is Liam Gillick who must be acknowledged as the most significant precursor of the artist's novel as is understood today. He wrote a number of them (1995; 1997; 2002a; 2004) as part of an artistic strategy that entailed a higher degree of complexity than that of Darger and de Cointet. In Gillick's (2006) own words, 'These books carry precise and clear ideas and structures within them, operate in parallel to other structures in an art context, and are revealed through titles, wall texts, and other forms of information' (pp. 160–161). His exhibition *The Wood Way* (2002b), for instance, was created based on notions of architecture and utopian thinking that had previously appeared in his artist's novel *Literally No Place* (2002a), which 'was published and freely available during the exhibition' (2006, p. 161).

Another artist's novel, *Erasmus Is Late* (Gillick, 1995), 'operated in parallel to a number of exhibition structures in the early 1990s' (2006, p. 160). It was written using an installation called *Prototype Erasmus Table #2 (Gent)* (1994; see Figure 3). During the time of the exhibition, the artist publicly enacted the writing process with the intention to create a narrative framework that would influence his artistic production (Schafaff, 2014, p. 197). As publisher Jane Rolo puts it: '[*Erasmus Is Late*] was Liam attempting to think through a series of problems and questions in his own mind that would later lead to his sculptural and video work. The book was a catalyst for ideas' (Jane Rolo interviewed in Hothi, 2015, p. 70). Its text 'takes the narrative strategy of "dramatic absence" for the reader to apprehend this underlying thought. In *Erasmus Is Late* … the central character, the dinner host, never comes home' (Stemmrich, 2001, p. 73). By dealing with the motif of absence as an event, rather than a concept, Gillick validates narrative fiction as an adequate means to accomplish some of the contents in his art practice.

After Gillick, a proliferation of artists' novels ensued, and the medium nowadays only seems to get more and more adepts. Yet, artists approach this new medium with a lack of knowledge. In the interviews that I conducted with a number of artists (see Appendix) there is a recurrent double question: 'Were you aware of other artists' novels? Did you read any before producing yours?' The answers elicited are either negative or vaguely refer to William Morris, Liam Gillick, Keren Cytter, and Sophie



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"Gizella!"

"Lok miprotg."

"Xannd..."

"Er?"

"Nonomotihur."

"Ol e jiswxenneho!"

"Atrebyse."

"Wli."

"Heefnho, Gizella."

"Ul myplinne."

Mejned skojdutet terccikledi etuxhiss leanxer Artobeli, topy ur duipokher havo ik pufeahv lamert. E howwhibed'tha, mluf

2. Guy de Cointet [Qei No Mysxdod, pseud.] (1973) *Espahor ledet ko uluner!* [artist's novel]. Photo: Marc Domage.

3. Liam Gillick (1994) *Prototype Erasmus Table #2 (Gent)* [installation]. CCS Bard Hessel Museum, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 23 June–21 December 2012. Photo: Chris Kendal.

Calle, as well as the collectively produced *Reena Spaulings* (Bernadette Corporation, 2004) and *Q* (Blissett, 2003). Such references rarely constitute a model to relate to, so the artists undertake their projects largely oblivious of other exemplary projects.

This situation creates an anomaly in the way artists approach their own medium. Emma Bee Bernstein (2015) contends that the qualities that define a medium are historically constructed: 'In order for a medium to have characteristic qualities it must be grounded in a tradition that has established these as intrinsic properties' (para. 2). Take video art, for instance: an artist will first of all learn about the theory and history of the medium, so that her new work builds on an existing tradition. Usually, the available body of knowledge enables the artist to situate her practice in the field of the visual arts, establishing a dialogue with other works, past and present. If the new work succeeds in making an innovative use of the employed medium, it will steer reactions and debates in the art world. Knowledge is thus necessary in order to avoid repeating past endeavours and to be able to make a significant contribution to the visual arts. From this point of view, artists' unawareness of the concept of the artist's novel may have been caused, at least partially, by the relatively short history of the medium. Moreover, the lack of tradition entails a lack of definition of its intrinsic properties.

On the other hand, the scarce knowledge about the concept and practice of the artist's novel makes the present a particularly interesting moment. Each artist's novel is the result of a unique creative strategy that owes nothing to other artists' novels. The practising artists cannot imitate, get inspiration from, or respond to aspects of other similar works, simply because they do not know of the existence of such practices.

Traditionally, the study of the relationship between literature and the visual arts has been pre-eminently constrained to one genre, namely poetry. Its diverse variants are well known: Surrealist poetry, Visual poetry, Concrete poetry, and, more recently, Uncreative writing that advocates the crossover between Conceptual Art and poetry (Goldsmith, 2011). Some of them are the objects of academic programmes, such as Uncreative writing in the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing. By contrast, novels written by visual artists, let alone artists'

novels, have received scant attention. What follows is a review of the few occurrences of the notion of artist's novel in critical articles.[4]

When Brian Wallis (1998) mentions Richard Prince's *Why I Go to the Movies Alone* (Prince, 1983) and calls it a 'novel' (pp. 95–96, quotation marks in the original), the artist's novel does not appear as a concept yet. However, in reference to Renée Green's artist's novel *Camino Road* (Green, 1994), which was published as part of a video installation in a group exhibition,[5] Wallis describes a kind of artistic production engaged with narrative:

> Another way in which artists sought to extend the notion of artists' books was through the production of a different form of narrative text … The new form that developed – particularly among artists of color – was closer to storytelling. In storytelling (as opposed to "literature"), meaning resides not simply in the text itself or in the subject matter, but in the human transmission of experience. (p. 97)

By relating *Camino Road* to storytelling, artists' narrative fiction is, although indirectly, distinguished from literature for the first time.

Maria Fusco's seminal article *How Hard It Is to Die* (2010) is most salient in at least two major respects. It coins the term 'artist's novel' and it poses some crucial questions: 'Should the artist's novel be read in the same way as the art object? And again: Should the artist's novel be read in the same way as a fiction writer's novel?' (p. 99) According to Fusco, the artist's novel is a hybrid and ambiguous creation. However, her article presents some limitations when it talks indistinctively about novels written by artists (Andre, 1959; Chapman, 2008; Dalí, 2007; Cytter, 2008; among others) and artists' novels (Chong et al., 2007; Gillick, 2009; Leo, 2009; Warhol, 1968). The term artist's novel is not yet fully conceptualised, because Fusco examines her examples primarily as literary objects and does not regard them as instances of an artistic medium.

Paraphrasing Jesper Juul (2001), to the question 'is the artist's novel the same as the literary novel?' there are two possible answers. The affirmative answer suggests

[4] I am not considering Lucy Ives' article *The Image of Genre* (2015). Although a few paragraphs are dedicated to the artist's novel, they do not constitute the focus of her text.

[5] *The Raw and the Cooked* (1994–95), at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

that the artist's novel is easily studied from within existing paradigms. The negative implies that we must start afresh, which entails applying a new set of questions and problematics leading to more productive research (para. 1). From this viewpoint, Fusco's enquiry opens up the possibility to start thinking of the artist's novel as something that does not belong to literature, but to the art world. The consequences of such a switch between disciplines are enormous, as they imply the potentiality to address artistic issues by means of literary devices. Consequently, if we want to study the artist's novel, we must place it within the terms of artistic discourse rather than a literary perspective. Alice Butler seems to concur with this view in her review of Cally Spooner's *Collapsing in Parts* (2013a), where she points out that 'The artist's novel has slowly become a medium of its own, the page a site of ideas' (Butler, 2013, p. 167).

Two more articles about the artist's novel have been published since then, by Brian Dillon (2015, of which more below) and Nathaniel Budzinski (2015), both in reaction to The Book Lovers project (Maroto and Zielińska, 2011–).[6] Yet, Budzinski fails to identify the singularity of the artist's novel when he ends his article with the question 'is it a good read?' (p. 43). With such a question, Budzinski evidences his belief that the artist's novel must be read following the parameters of the literary novel. A rather more pertinent question would be, as Fusco already advanced, not whether an artist's novel is a good or a bad read, but *how to read it*.

The most recent appearances of the term artist's novel, in Matthew McLean's (2016) and Luke Skrebowski's (2016) respective articles, confirm its growing popularity. McLean recounts how, when emailing his editor to propose an article about theatre plays written by visual artists, he pitched it as: 'Artists' plays: the new artists' novels?' (p. 114). Skrebowski, on the other hand, defines the artist's novel as an 'artistic strategy of producing a *not literature as art*' (para. 93, italics in the original). He accurately distinguishes it from previous literary experiences: 'It is not an attempt at a not-literature within the field of literature which is a place occupied by genres such as the anti-novel and concrete poetry and by groups such as Oulipo and the Lettrists' (footnote 69).

[6] The Book Lovers is the name of the collaborative art project I carry out with curator Joanna Zielińska, focused on the artist's novel. Its base is the creation of a collection of artists' novels with a parallel online database, complemented with a series of exhibitions, public programmes, pop-up bookstores, commissions, and publications.

The omissions are as significant as the mentions, and among the former Clive Philpot's (1998) might rank amongst the most clamorous. His neglect of the artist's novel is even more blatant when considering that Phillpot has been obsessed with setting definitions and categories, which he has made and remade over the years:

> Among the many categories in this spectrum [artists' books] are these: magazine issues and magazineworks; assemblings and anthologies; writings, diaries, statements, and manifestos; visual poetry and wordworks; scores; documentation; reproductions and sketchbooks; albums and inventories; graphic works; comic books; illustrated books; page art, pageworks, and mail art; and book art and bookworks. (p. 38)

Among such a thorough repertoire, it is surprising to observe the exclusion of the artist's novel. But Phillpot's attitude is the rule among art critics, not an exception.[7]

Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes (2012) identifies this problematic in her analysis of the work of Rodney Graham, author of the artist's novel *The System of Landor's Cottage: A Pendant to Poe's Last Story* (Graham, 2012). She claims that, although writing has sustained his career from the beginning, it 'has been a neglected part of the oeuvre: always present, but nearly invisible, important in developing and substantiating the practice, but unruly: minor' (p. 96). Lerm Hayes associates this situation with the long-lasting influence of 'Clement Greenberg's dictum that visual artists should avoid literature like the plague' (p. 97).

The artist's novel's historical lack of recognition has also affected any other form of long narrative fiction written by visual artists. The introduction of literary traits into the visual arts was an unacceptable hybridisation for an influential strand of modernism, known as medium-specificity (led by critic Clement Greenberg), and therefore a crucial factor in having remained ignored for so long.

In his seminal essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Greenberg (1998a) celebrates the cultural height achieved with the avant-garde, specifically thanks to the non-representational or abstract arts, which refer to nothing but themselves. Art has become its own subject matter, purging any other content in the process. For Greenberg, the only acceptable experience is the one contained within the

[7] When I asked Phillpot about such an oversight, he replied: 'I did not think about such a category, and in the same way neither did I think about poets' novels or even accountants' novels' (Phillpot, interview, p. 190). It is interesting to notice how, on the other hand, he did not fail to think about Visual poetry.

boundaries of the painting's frame, which refers to its own materiality, its own medium. The 'world of common, extraverted experience' (p. 532) must be renounced and, with it, any attempt to *tell a story* in the visual arts.

Greenberg takes his cue from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1874), where it is argued that painting and poetry are two inherently different media and should never overlap. A successful work of art is that which remains faithful to the specific properties of its medium (Bernstein, 2015; Ryan, 2014).

In *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, Greenberg (1998b) advocates more decidedly the notion of medium-specificity, being particularly aggressive against what he sees as literature's oppressive and 'corrupting influence' (p. 557). Artists are called to 'revolt against the dominance of literature' (p. 556), which serves as a vehicle to infect the visual arts with ideas. Each type of art must lie within its boundaries: 'Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art' (p. 558). Purity, as the state in which the artwork is uncontaminated by the influence of other media, is the ideal of medium-specificity and the artistic horizon towards which the avant-garde must naturally tend.

In the same vein, Marshal McLuhan (1964) famously states that 'the medium is the message'. Unlike Greenberg, McLuhan does not focus solely on the distinction between literature and the visual arts. By taking the notion of medium self-reference to an extreme he discusses the effects of media on culture in a broad sense (Bernstein, 2015). McLuhan insists on the idea that the content of any medium is another medium (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8), culminating, in so doing, the process of expunging any content external to the medium itself.

The artist's novel is diametrically opposed to medium-specificity. Its hybrid nature embodies impurity itself. It is a case of contamination between two different disciplines, and precisely of the worst kind because it represents the reintroduction of 'the oppressive dominance of literature and its corrupting influence' over the visual arts. From this viewpoint, it is possible to align the emergence of the artist's novel with a different theoretical strand that challenges Greenberg's legacy.

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams (1977) criticises the notion of medium-specificity, in which

> A familiar process of reification occurred, reinforced by the influence of formalism. The properties of 'the medium' were abstracted as if they defined the practice, rather than being its means. This interpretation then suppressed the full sense of practice, which has always to be defined as work on a material for a specific purpose within certain necessary social conditions. (pp. 159–160)

For Williams, the double movement of art's idealisation (art must be pure) and the reification of the medium is consequence of a classist ideology, aimed to create a different status between the liberal arts (suitable for a higher class) and mechanical work, intended for ordinary people (p. 160). Williams traces the evolution of the term 'medium', which in the past referred to the physical means by which the artwork is materialised, but nowadays has evolved to mean a social practice. 'The "medium" is a form of social organization, something essentially different from the idea of an intermediate communicative substance' (p. 159). Every crisis of technique caused by the apparition of a new medium, such as, for instance, photography in the nineteenth century, brings about a crisis in the relationship of art with society. This is what leads Williams to view the medium primarily as social practice, in the sense that it acts as a catalyst for change in modern cultural production (pp. 163–164).

Rosalind Krauss (2000) acknowledges the weight of Greenberg's legacy, which she deems a 'critical toxic waste' (p. 5) impossible to avoid:

> That such a definition of the medium as mere physical object, in all its reductiveness and drive toward reification, had become common currency in the art world, and that the name Clement Greenberg had been attached to this definition so that, from the '60s on, to utter the word "medium" meant invoking "Greenberg," was the problem I faced. (p. 6)

Krauss criticises art's disengagement with the world when it only pursues the purity of its own medium-specificity (p. 11). She goes on to trace the vicissitudes of the notion of medium-specificity in the twentieth century. Paradoxically, the separation between media, by narrowing down painting's definition exclusively to its physical features, ended up making it undistinguishable from sculpture (p. 10). The latest developments in contemporary art led to the termination of medium-specificity and inaugurated a new time characterised by a post-medium condition (p. 12). This term applies to a situation in which media are subordinated to the contents that artists deal with. Post-medium condition is a useful term to understand artistic trends as

varied as, for instance, institutional critique, relational aesthetics, or post-performance (de Brugerolle, Canet, and Wood, 2014), which are defined by the social and/or political impact that they strive to exert. Krauss' aggregative concept of the medium becomes expanded beyond the artwork's physical aspects to include notions such as *process* and *experience*.

Art critic Daniel Kunitz (2011) later applied Krauss' post-medium diagnosis to identify a new operational mode among contemporary artists, which he calls 'the Blur'.

> The Blur is … where the boundaries between the arts—music, literature, theater, sculpture, and so on—are nearly erased; where those between media are porous; where genres blend into one another; where the notion of the autonomous art object has gone fuzzy; and where that of art itself has been smeared, as it were. Artists of the Blur tend to reject modernist purity in all its forms but most particularly the sort of purity that demands that each art develop what is most intrinsic to it. They freely bring narrative—what was once known as literary content—into painting. (p. 50)

For Kunitz, the model of modernity that was anchored to notions of purity has become obsolete. Medium-specificity is no longer relevant. Visual artists, in increasing numbers, are recovering long discarded practices of narrative and fiction in their work, most significantly by means of the artist's novel, of which he mentions some examples as 'artists of the Blur', including Bernadette Corporation (2004), Jill Magid (2010), Mai-Thu Perret (1999–), and Seth Price (2015a).

The current post-medium context creates the optimal conditions for the emergence of the artist's novel at this particular moment in history. Contemporary art is now prone to favour practices in which writing is central 'and the line delimiting literary from visual art virtually nonexistent' (Kunitz, 2011, p. 49). Indeed, in recent years there has been a growing turn in the visual arts towards narrative literature. Although its denomination varies from author to author, I will refer to this as the 'narrative turn' in the visual arts.

Maria Fusco (2010) situates the emergence of the artist's novel in a 'discursive turn' that has made a contemporary 'bloom of writing artists' possible.

> We can note the formal slippage of artist's writing and its solidification into 'the novel' as part of a more generalized rupture in process and audience – often characterized in an art context by the phrase 'The Discursive Turn' – and, with specific reference to art and writing, situated within a perceived crisis in criticality and judgment procedures. (p. 100)

When discussing the current proliferation of artists' novels, Brian Dillon (2015) also argues for the existence of a 'literary turn' in the visual arts (p. 41), whilst observing that

> the present literary—and especially fictional—turn is more invested in an idea of literature itself than either the inheritance of artists' writing or the modes of its making will fully explain. Nor is it sufficient to say that a frank embrace of the literary is the logical upshot of older arguments about the uncertain place of critical writing and critical theory. (p. 46)

Dillon thus positions himself in disagreement with Fusco, in that he situates the origin of the narrative turn and, more concretely, of the artist's novel, in literature, not in artist's writing. Whilst it is true that the results of my research do not support the idea of the artist's novel to be a 'solidification' of artist's writing, as Fusco claims, let us not forget that, although artists might relate to some literary tradition, they do so in order to address artistic issues.

Dillon also disagrees with Fusco in that, for him, the narrative turn does not emerge as a response to the crisis of art theory and art criticism. In this case, my research supports Fusco's views. The artist's novel is, among other things, an attempt to renew the language with which we read and write in and about art. This point will be further elaborated in Chapter 5.

In spite of the differences between their arguments, both Fusco and Dillon coincide in identifying a current turn towards narrative literature, which serves to introduce fiction into the visual arts and finds a specific expression in the artist's novel. However, they limit their analyses to describe a perceived reality by means of a number of examples. Why this is happening and why at this time in history, remains unexplained.

References to the narrative turn also appear in Christopher K. Ho's (2015) enquiry about a contemporary 'narrative impulse' (p. 49) and Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes' (2012) contention that 'The interest in literary forms is currently gaining

momentum—a community—among visual artists' (p. 86). More vaguely, curator and editor Dieter Roelstraete (2011) recognises 'a general condition afflicting cultural production' (p. 99) characterised by an increasing production of text-based artworks and an interest in narration and fiction (p. 101), which materialise not only in printed matter but are expanded to other media, such as performance and installation. Such proliferation is, for Roelstraete, a reaction against a 'hypertrophy of image production' (p. 103).

Whilst the existence of a narrative turn has been met with some consensus in the art world, agreement on its origin and cause is a more controversial matter. The usage of the term 'turn' appears to indicate a correlation between the current narrative turn and the textual turn that happened during the 1960s and 1970s, primarily by way of Conceptual Art (Ho, 2015, p. 49). However, a comparative analysis between both turns will prove that the linkage of the artist's novel with Conceptual Art is a misleading lineage.

Artist Seth Price (2015b)[8] points out that a generation of artists who were involved in the textual turn (Robert Smithson, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, and Stephen Kaltenbach, plus art dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub, among others), 'was primarily concerned with finding exhibition alternatives to the gallery wall and in any case often used these sites to demonstrate dryly theoretical propositions rather than address issues of, say, desire' (pp. 114–115).

Daniel Kunitz (2011) extends this claim by adding that a new generation of artists are in fact addressing issues of desire by means of narrative and fiction (p. 51). Although both Conceptual Art and the artist's novel are text-based, they are fundamentally different because they pursue different artistic concerns. According to Kunitz, the current generation of artists 'uses text as a means of restoring this spurned aspect [narrative] to visual art' (p. 52).

Artist Christopher K. Ho (2015)[9] also concurs with this view when he states that

> The current narrative tendency might continue one major strain of the 1970s, elaborating the textual turn into a literary return of sorts. Yet contemporary handling of language seems different in goal and in form. … If the 1970s

[8] Seth Price is also the author of the novel *Fuck Seth Price* (2015a).
[9] Christopher K. Ho is also the author of the artist's novel *Hirsch E.P. Rothko by Hirsch E.P. Rothko* (2010).

> moved away from the visual toward the textual, it was not back into the fold of traditional narrative that Clement Greenberg assiduously expunged from art a generation earlier. (p. 49)

For Ho, the artist's novel reintroduces issues of narrative, fiction, and identification, which are completely alien to the Conceptual Art agenda. Similarly, 'forces like "imagination," "creativity," and "invention"—long attenuated by critical theory—may once again be appropriate, even essential, to making and viewing art' (p. 51).

When I interviewed Seth Siegelaub (2015), a pioneering promoter of Conceptual Art in the New York art scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s, I asked him if he recognised in Conceptual Art a historical precedent for the artist's novel. His answer was negative: 'What's interesting … is the fact that the book is a narrative form. And most of the works that characterize the avant-garde, or so-called avant-garde, plastic arts are very much not about that at all' (p. 135).

Therefore, we must conclude that the artist's novel is not a consequence of Conceptual Art. It is neither an inheritance of previous forms of artist's writing, nor a literary genre. By this I do not mean that the artist's novel is not able to make a significant contribution to literature. That might be the case. I am simply stressing that it is a hybrid medium that originates in the field of the visual arts. It has its own logic and responds to its own concerns, which, in some cases, may partially overlap those typical of artist's writing or literature, without being part of them. The coincidence with some aspects of other disciplines must not lead to hasty lineage conclusions. The artist's novel emerges in relation to deep historical changes in the contemporary art world: a post-medium condition of which the narrative turn is a consequence, within which the artist's novel finds its context.

Having situated the phenomenon of the artist's novel in the context in which it appears, I will now move on to define its main traits. Before doing that, however, I would like to emphasise that my research is not primarily concerned with defining what is specific of the artist's novel. I believe that a discussion that aspires to be pertinent today must be centred not on what the artist's novel is, but on what it *does* to the visual arts. Nevertheless, in the context of this thesis, I find it necessary to advance a general definition of the artist's novel in order to clarify the terms that will appear in subsequent chapters. I am aware that such a definition could only be the result of public debate and a certain consensus, but it is the intention of this thesis to

serve as an instrument that is able to spark such a debate. My definition of 'definition' is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's (2009) theory of 'family resemblances'. From this viewpoint, the definition of artist's novel that I am advancing is by no means to be taken as set in concrete. Instead, it must be taken as 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (p. 36e). For a piece to be considered an artist's novel it is not necessary that all its features coincide with the ones outlined below. Like members of a family, some artists' novels might combine some of the traits but not others. It could even happen that two artists' novels do not share any common trait, but they still belong to the same category by means of the continuous overlapping of shared affinities with other members in the group (p. 37e). With this in mind, I proceed to define the artist's novel for the purpose of this research:

- The artist's novel is a medium in the visual arts. The artist employs the novel exactly as video or performance, for example.
- An artist's novel is an artwork dependent on the structure of a novel. Even though it might relate to a literary tradition, it is produced in the context of the visual arts.
- The artist's novel is part of an art project, which may be constituted by different media, among which the artist's novel usually occupies a pre-eminent position.
- The artist's novel is a textual work; the use of images and sound takes place in other works of the same art project.
- The artist's novel expands the narrative beyond the space of the page to take place in a body of work that belongs to the same art project. The connection between them is imbued with a shared narrativity although, individually, they do not need to be narrative.
- Because it is a narrative fiction work, the artist's novel (and, by extension, the art project it belongs to) privileges the use of faculties such as imagination and identification rather than analytical distance. It is predicated on immersion, it favours the deceleration of artistic experience and the protracted engagement of the spectator.
- The artist's novel appears to the artist first of all as a fantasy: the imaginary scenario in which the possible field of contact with their audience could be enlarged thanks to the narrative form and its potential to be widely distributed.

- The artist's novel is, at least in its most accomplished examples, the result of a collaborative practice. The trajectory that goes from the initial fantasy to the final publication usually traverses paradoxical and contradictory situations.
- The artist's novel is meant to be read and proposes enjoyment as a valid artistic experience. Paradoxically, the specificity of the artist's novel is not to be found in its text (which at first sight may resemble a conventional novel) but in the process of its creation, which is publicly performed and shown to an audience.
- It follows that reading the artist's novel alone would not give a full account of its contents. It is necessary to situate it in the context where it originates: the art project and the artistic processes employed.
- The artist's novel carries with it a certain inadequacy. Often, it is only possible to show fragments that belong to a larger narrative. Hence the difficulty of exhibiting this kind of project, posing curatorial challenges to art institutions.
- The artist's novel's meaning is not defined by its intrinsic formal qualities only (such as the text printed on the page), but also by the relationship that it establishes with the artistic and institutional context in which it appears and with which it interacts.

Chapter 2

Research Methods

In this chapter I will explain my research methods, structured in two blocks corresponding to the theoretical essay (*A New Medium*) and the practice-led part of the research (*The Fantasy of the Novel*).

Part I: *A New Medium*:

- Source material (artists' novels)
- Interviews
- Archival material

Part II: *The Fantasy of the Novel*:

- Art project (*Tamam Shud*)
- Note taking
- Reading group
- Writing as research

Part I: *A New Medium*

Source material

From the perspective of Estelle Barrett's (2007c) claim that 'In creative arts research, the literature review extends beyond the reading of texts to the engagement with the work of other practitioners' (p. 188), reading the source material, the artists' novels themselves, has constituted the basis of my research, starting with a bibliography of novels written by visual artists, which I have been composing since 2011, spurred by

the lack of such an elementary resource.[10] Gathering the data has been an organic process based on a word-of-mouth method. When meeting artists, curators, and writers, particularly from geographical areas where my research has not reached yet, I always ask whether they know of any titles that could be added to the bibliography. The criteria for inclusion are works of narrative fiction written in prose, 20,000–60,000-word long (novellas) or 60,000 words onwards (novels), created by visual artists. I have studied all the titles and, whenever possible, been in direct communication with the artist-author in order to collect additional information.

This resulted in the publication of the bibliography as an online database.[11] Each item has an entry containing a literary synopsis, the description of its relationship with the art project (if applicable), the artist's biography, and a tag system that enables the navigation through the database thanks to its organisation in categories such as authorship, genre, theme, and publishing modality.

By following this method, I have been able to identify the artists' novels within the larger group of novels written by visual artists. I have read 51 artists' novels, paying special attention to the traces of the artistic process in the narrative text. The comparative analysis between the artists' novels and the art projects to which they belong has been instrumental in identifying the four key case studies that articulate the central chapters of this essay.

In addition to this, I have written some book reviews of Liam Gillick's *Literally No Place* (2002a), Cally Spooner's *Collapsing in Parts* (2013a), and Gerry Bibby's *The Drumhead* (2014c), which study these artists' novels mainly from a literary perspective, examining aspects such as plot, backstory, characters, imagery and description, design, time management, point of view, and the reader's work.

Interviews

I agree with Grant H. Kester (2011) when he notes that the advantage of the interview, a method typically associated with the social sciences, lies in the fact that the interviewee is able to dispute or challenge certain assessments and thus claim

[10] See http://www.thebooklovers.info/Artists-Novels-Bibliography [Accessed 10/01/2017].
[11] See http://ensembles.mhka.be/ensembles/the-book-lovers?locale=en [Accessed 10/01/2017].

some countervailing authority. This, Kester adds, 'is particularly relevant given the increasing frequency with which artists also function as critics and theorists in their own right' (p. 231). Confronted with the lack of specific literature on the topic of the artist's novel motivated me to turn to the source and thus adopt the interview as a central research method. Through the course of my research, I conducted interviews with:

- Artist duo Goldin+Senneby, 3–26 December 2014, by email.
- Artist Benjamin Seror, 6–22 December 2014, by Google Hangouts.
- Curator Francis McKee, 17 January 2015, in person.
- Artist Mai-Thu Perret, 28 January 2015, by Google Hangouts.
- Artist Cally Spooner, 1 February 2015, by Google Hangouts.
- Curator Vivian Ziherl, 22 April 2015, in person.
- Writer and editor Natasha Soobramanien, 17 May 2015, in person.
- Writer, editor, and curator Clive Phillpot, 30 April–28 May 2016, by email.[12]
- Artist Alex Cecchetti, 16 May 2016, in person.
- Artist Bert Danckaert, 2 February 2017, in person.
- Art critic and gallerist Łukasz Gorczyca, 23 February 2018, by Google Hangouts.
- Jan Jasiński, 23 February 2018, by Google Hangouts.[13]

Key theoretical, artistic, and methodological notions were identified during the interviews, which in turn oriented the search for relevant bibliographic material. For example, the interview with Benjamin Seror revealed that, in *Mime Radio* (2015), notions such as fiction, imagination, readability, and the establishment of an empathic relationship with the audience are essential, and that the artist finds in the artist's novel the ideal medium to accomplish such artistic ambitions. Furthermore, it put me on the track to J.L. Austin's (1976) speech act theory, which was extremely valuable to elucidate Seror's performative use of language.

The interviews introduce a subjective approach to the reality of the artist's novel, especially relevant 'in its capacity to bring into view particularities of lived experience that reflect alternative realities that are either marginalised or not yet recognised in established theory and practice' (Barrett, 2007b, p. 143). This sort of information,

[12] This first group of interviews were conducted in relation to Part I: *A New Medium*. Their transcriptions can be found in the Appendix.
[13] This second group of interviews were conducted in relation to Part II: *The Fantasy of the Novel*. Their transcriptions are also in the Appendix.

usually conveyed by oral transmission, produces priceless testimonies, such as Benjamin Seror's recounting of the reaction of a Fluxus artist to one of his performances (Seror, interview, p. 146).

I approached the interviews in a semi-structured style, starting with a general guide that included a recurring set of questions for each interviewee:

- Were you aware of other artists' novels?
- Did you read any before producing yours?
- What are the reasons that motivated the creation of a project, which is not only narrative in nature, but makes such a narrative explicit in the form of a novel?
- An artist's novel is a hybrid and also ambiguous object: should yours be read as a regular narrative fiction work or as an artwork?
- Do you think that both modalities of reading can be simultaneous (and how could such a thing be possible), or does one prevail over the other?

Whilst this ensured that some general areas of information were collected, I also made some specific questions in relation to each particular case. At the same time, I opened the interview to new enquiries derived from some of the answers.

When I understood that the artist's novel is, at least in its most accomplished examples, the result of a collaborative project, I decided to interview agents that were engaged in the creative process other than the artists themselves. For example, in relation to *The Drumhead* (Bibby, 2014c), I collected three different points of view: the curator's, the editor's, and the artist's.[14] Their testimonies are complementary to each other and compose the picture of a complex project that does not rely on the work of the artist alone. In a collaborative process, the resulting artwork is rarely a direct formalisation of the artist's intentions: intersubjective relationships, specific areas of authority, negotiations, and misunderstandings are some of the factors that shape the artwork through such process. However, this is a reality that art criticism, art theory, and curatorial texts seldom engage with. This view is supported by Kester (2013), who writes that 'There has been a gradual drift away from closer engagement with *the materiality of art practice* as a result of the often-programmatic manner in which theory has been applied by many critics and historians' (para. 19, my italics). As a result, critical theory fails to sustain a 'substantive engagement with collaborative experience

[14] In the Appendix, Gerry Bibby's interview is omitted for the sake of conciseness, since no passages were used as references in my thesis.

and interaction' (Kester, 2011, p. 15), which are central to artistic processes such as the creation of an artist's novel. This is one of the reasons that motivated my practice-led research to take the form of a novel, of which more below.

Archival material

The study of relevant archival material has been another important research method. E.g.:

- The letter written by literary agent Edward Orloff, of McCormick & Williams, to Alexander Provan, editor of Goldin+Senneby's *Headless* (2015), in which he admits the impossibility to bring their artist's novel to a mainstream publisher.
- Kate Cooper and Richard John Jones' documentary film *Looking for Headless* (2010).
- Video footage of Benjamin Seror's performances that helped reconstruct the project's trajectory and the correspondence between each performance and chapter in the artist's novel (see Chapter 3).
- Similarly, posters, photo and video documentation of Cally Spooner's 'Footnotes' enabled the reconstruction of her project's trajectory (see Chapter 4).

Whenever possible, I personally attended the art projects connected to the artists' novels, as for instance Benjamin Seror's performance *Mime Radio, Chapter X* (2014a) at Kunstverein Amsterdam.

One of my main arguments in this thesis is that the artist's novel is created with artistic tools, and that the locus of the contents lies largely in the creative process. However, the essay's research methods (source materials, interviews, and archival materials), although extremely valuable, are also intrinsically limited, insofar as they are suited to collect information after the artist's novel's publication, thus providing only a retrospective vision of the artistic and writing processes. As Barrett (2007a) contends when discussing creative practice-led research, 'because knowledge of the condition of production comes *after the fact* …, the finished product … conceals the *modus operandi*' (p. 4, italics in the original). My research would be thus incomplete if it did not engage with the actual process rather than its reconstruction. It was therefore necessary to develop new research methods that allowed me to engage in real time

with the trajectory that goes from the initial artist's fantasy of the novel to its reality in the world.

Part II: *The Fantasy of the Novel*

Art project

For the practice-led part of the PhD thesis I employed an art project as research method. I decided to commission an artist's novel in order to research its process of creation, from its inception to its publication. In December 2015, I circulated an open call for art projects that contemplated the creation of a new artist's novel, whose production would be supported by the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. I received 230 applications from artists all around the world, seven of which were shortlisted for a personal interview. A creative understanding of the medium and originality in the proposal were decisive factors during the selection process. Since the project would be developed over almost two years, personal affinity with the artist was considered as well.

The selected project was *Tamam Shud* by Alex Cecchetti. He wrote his application interpolating fictional elements, a gesture that reflected a genuine engagement with the nature of the open call. His previous work, focused mostly on performance and installation, showed a strong interest in narrative and imagination, which led him to publish a novella, *A Society that Breathes Once a Year* (2012). In order to create the new artist's novel's narrative, he devised a plan featuring five episodic performances and an exhibition to take place in 2016–17.

Throughout the duration of the project I collected a considerable amount of archival materials: press releases, photographs, video recordings, etc. However, if I had opted for a documentary record of the *Tamam Shud* project to be the output of my practice-led research, the aspects of the creative process I am interested in would have remained concealed, because the visible side of an art project is the result of multiple aspects, not measurable and rarely accessible to the viewer's experience. For example: intersubjective relationships and their transformations during the project; casual conversations that change the course of the project; situations that cause both personal sympathies and disagreements; accidents and coincidences; competence or

incompetence of those involved; meetings in which practical questions such as budget and communication strategy are discussed, and how informal factors influence them, etc. All of this crucially determines an art project's outcome beyond the artist's concept. The art project is hardly ever a transparent and direct formalisation of the artist's ambitions, and this is particularly true in the case of the artist's novel, where those involved in such a collaborative endeavour proceed without any real knowledge of the medium they are dealing with. Consequently, a narrative account of the creative process appeared to be the most suitable means to convey such unmeasurable aspects. In other words, the output of my practice-led research is a novel about the process of creation of an artist's novel, called *The Fantasy of the Novel*.

Although both instances of creative work are constitutive of the same research project, I would like to make the distinction between *Tamam Shud* (the art project as research method) and *The Fantasy of the Novel* (the research output). Here I follow the two arguments traced by Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009, p. 5) in their twofold definition of practice-led research: 'firstly, … creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs' (which is congruent with *The Fantasy of the Novel*, in being the research output); 'secondly, … creative practice – the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art – can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research' (which is consistent with the *Tamam Shud* project, in being a research method).

Note taking

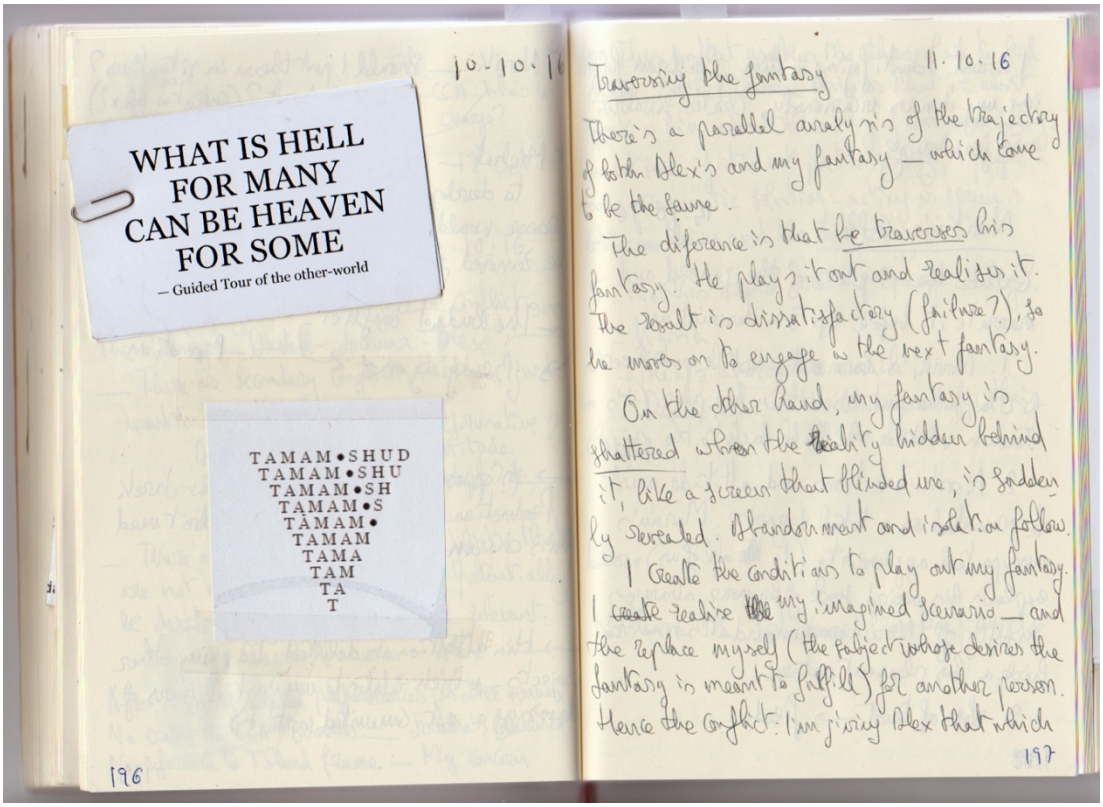
While accompanying the development of the *Tamam Shud* project, I employed a number of additional research methods to extract relevant data, among which a note-taking system that proved to be extremely useful. I always took notes a few hours to a few days after the facts. I proceeded this way in order to fulfil the desired unobtrusiveness (taking notes in front of the participants would have been disturbing and would have modified their natural behaviour), and also in order to be selective about the events and aspects that were relevant to my research. I kept the notion of 'being relevant' as open as possible, so a great number of notes were taken and eventually not used. The nature of the notes varied: transcriptions of meetings, conversations, and other situations; descriptions of certain places and characters; technical details, such as budget and timelines; reflections on the writing process itself,

etc. Often, the notebook would be the recipient not only of handwritten annotations, but also of archival materials, such as postcards, invitations, music scores, and photographs (see Figure 4). Nevertheless, as Joan Didion (2017) reminds us, the point is often not about keeping a factual record of the events as much as registering 'how it felt to me' (p. 77). The note is important because of the information it contains but also because it is a memento that triggers the recollection of what I had in mind at that moment, which was important when writing *The Fantasy of the Novel*.

Having written the essay helped me concentrate on particular aspects from a multitude of events. This is not to say that I carried out practice-led research solely as a way to test certain presumptions. 'Accompanying the process' became my motto: the direct involvement in the creative process extended the scope of the research in the sense that it facilitated access to areas of experience where other research methods could not reach. For instance, I took special care to follow the development of Alex Cecchetti's fantasy of the novel and how it needed to be constantly negotiated with the actual context in which the project took place, sometimes in disagreement with other people's desires (the curators, the designers, the editors, etc.). I was also particularly interested in understanding how the artist's novel gradually emerged by means of artistic tools such as performance and exhibition, as well as the audience's and readers' engagement and reactions.

Being the initiator and curator of the *Tamam Shud* project, I acknowledged that my presence would inevitably influence the course of the situations observed. I accepted the fact that I would be the catalyst of events that inexorably would get me involved as well. The intention to emphasise such subjective immersion in the events led me to write the novel in the first person, a feature that will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Although I employed unobtrusive methods, I did not hide my research activity from the subjects who were being observed. The participants (those who were liable to appear in *The Fantasy of the Novel* as a fictional version of themselves) were informed in advance and their consent was requested in written form. For this purpose, I devised an Informed Consent Form, in which the participants were offered the possibility of having their names changed or even being removed from the narrative.



4. Double spread of *The Fantasy of the Novel* notebook.

Reading group

Grant H. Kester (2011) claims that 'The contemporary viewer, or participant, is also available as a resource for the analysis of reception at a level of proximity and detail' (p. 231). From this viewpoint I deemed it necessary to collect the readers' opinions while *Tamam Shud* was still an ongoing process. On 23 May 2017, with the help of my co-supervisor Jane McKie, I organised a reading group to examine a selection of chapters excerpted from *Tamam Shud*, formed by PhD and MSc level students from the Creative Writing programme at the University of Edinburgh. The intention was to discuss the writing as writing, without any awareness of the art project (although, eventually, some aspects of it entered the discussion). Their opinions were particularly valuable because I was so immersed in the project that it was difficult for me to see the object of my research without the artistic and personal context.

The discussion led to very interesting results: the text was unanimously praised as readable and enjoyable, in fact 'a good novel' that has its own integrity and doesn't need the art project to stand on its own. Also, the idea that *Tamam Shud*'s narrative structure would have benefited from a serialised publication, rather than a paperback edition, which, interestingly, was in contradiction with Alex Cecchetti's fantasy of the novel. Furthermore, there was an acute observation about the art project's three elements (performance, exhibition, and artist's novel) not intersecting in the *Tamam Shud* three-circle scheme. All these contributions were incorporated in the voice of *The Fantasy of the Novel* characters.

The reading group perceived *Tamam Shud* as a work that could be read as a traditional novel but could also be strengthened by different sources, such as the performances and the exhibition. This was a very relevant insight, because it showed that Alex Cecchetti's creative strategy was different from the other four case studies I researched in my essay. Unlike Benjamin Seror, he did not use the art project as a writing technique; unlike Mai-Thu Perret, he did not write the fiction as a machine to make the art. In *Tamam Shud*, art project and artist's novel are communicating vessels within the same system. On the one hand, the artworks' interpretation is altered by their inclusion in an overarching narrative; on the other, the artist's novel is the recipient of that same narrative, which is created through the artworks' reinterpretation. It is a subtle way to connect both art project and artist's novel, in a way I had not seen before. My conclusion is that the lack of knowledge in which other artists before him operated was starting to change at the time when Cecchetti created *Tamam Shud* (he had

already published a novella (2012) and was exposed to my research during the period of our collaboration), so that he was able to work with the artist's novel medium in a more sophisticated manner than his predecessors.

Writing as research

Having defined what is meant by the art-project-as-research method in the context of this thesis, I will now move on to discuss the research output. *The Fantasy of the Novel* shares some characteristics with the academic writing mode known as fictocriticism, which Carl Rhodes (2015) defines as 'a writing engaged in genre-bending as a literary and theoretical engagement with existence and selfhood' (p. 289). Whereas I did not explicitly adopt it as a research method, the way fictocriticism engages with the production of knowledge does resonate with my own work. According to Rhodes, fictocriticism's multidisciplinary approach seeks to 'blur the boundaries between the fictional, the factual and the theoretical' (p. 294). I had an email exchange with Rhodes in which he also stated that fictocriticism 'is methodological, but it is about blurring the traditional distinctions between style and content as well. The text not being a neutral conduit of meaning is central to the method and the object of research, in that sense' (personal communication, 7 June 2016). Rhodes' reflexion serves to explain why, in my project, writing fiction becomes more than a question of style, it influences the way the research is conducted. From this viewpoint, *The Fantasy of the Novel* is not a formal choice applied to some previous research work. As Anna Gibbs (2005) claims:

> It is writing as research, stubbornly insisting on the necessity of a certain *process* in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow *after the event*, a simple 'outcome' of a research which always takes place elsewhere, in the archive, in the field or the focus group, on the web. (para. 4, italics in the original)

Whilst I agree with Gibbs, a question arises about what sort of knowledge is produced by this particular instance of *writing as research*. Commenting on practice-led research, Brad Haseman (2006) maintains that 'the symbolic data works performatively. It not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself' (p. 102). Consequently, the knowledge conveyed by *The Fantasy of the Novel* is about the information that the text contains as much as about what it does by means of its literary

traits. When discussing the cognitive value of literature Catherine Wilson (1983) argues that ‘A person may be said not only to know, e.g. *how* to play chess or ride a bicycle, and *that*, e.g. the War of the Roses began in 1456, but also *what it is like to*, e.g. fall suddenly in love, lose a child to death, or undergo religious conversion’ (pp. 491–492, italics in the original). Thus, *The Fantasy of the Novel* entices the reader’s identification through narrative empathy and emotional investment to comprehend not only how certain events defined the contents of the *Tamam Shud* project, and that certain vicissitudes happened at some point in time, but also *what it is like to* create an artist’s novel.

A precedent to my practice-led research is Bert Danckaert’s artist’s novel *The Extras* (2016). Danckaert is a photographer who, in 2014, received his PhD from the University of Tilburg with a project constituted by *The Extras* and a photography book called *Simple Present* (2013). In the artist’s novel, the author gives a semi-fictional account of his failure to produce a series of photographs in the film sets of Bollywood. I did not know about his project when I began my research. When I learned about its existence I asked Danckaert for an interview, because I was curious to know about his experience in managing some issues that I was dealing with in my own writing process: most notably, narrative fiction’s ability ‘to create this kind of mental idea of what your work is about without actually showing it’ (Danckaert, interview, p. 202). In other words, the possibility for a visual artist to relinquish the production of images in order to evoke them in the reader’s imagination. It was also interesting learning about Danckaert’s concern about introducing process and subjectivity in his writing, two notions that are central to my research. He also expressed a resistance to using critical language to reflect upon his practice. As a result, he decided to ‘write a subjective, novel-like essay’ in order not to become ‘the art historian or the art philosopher’ of his own work, because ‘that would have felt very uncomfortable and pretentious’ (p. 203). Instead, he opted to experience the artistic process ‘in the middle of it and trying to describe it’ (p. 204). It is not only about articulating a language to reflect on his own practice, it is about language becoming the medium to create the art as well.

The Fantasy of the Novel is written in the first person and in the past tense. Whereas the text could have possibly gained a greater immediacy and intensity with the use of the present tense, the past tense allows a better integration of narrative and reflexive passages. The narrator’s point of view is that of someone who remembers past events, so his reliability must be taken with a pinch of salt. Making the narrator’s voice openly

subjective facilitated the use of fiction in a work that is based on real facts, as it is implicit that the narrative is not an objective report of the events as they happened. The use of the third person would have created an external, omniscient narrator that would have been problematic, for example, in the instances of direct speech, by giving the impression that the characters said verbatim what is reflected in the dialogues. Because the characters are based on actual people, I deemed it appropriate to make clear that the narrator's voice is a personal recollection and that the whole narrative is pervaded by his interpretation of the events.

The inclusion of drawings instead of photographs responds to the accentuation of such a subjective vision. They are inserted in the narrative at some specific moments following a threefold rationale: documents (Alex Cecchetti's notebooks; pages of the *Rubáiyát*, etc.); diagrams (for example, the drawing called *Tamam Shud project's narrative connections at the time of Episode 3* offers a visualisation of the current status of the protagonist's investigations and, at the same time, a map to explore the *Tamam Shud* symbolic universe); and an aide to imagination with a depiction of some of the artworks and portraits of the characters (Alex, Seth, Monika).

The administration of fiction was an issue that had to be considered very carefully, since abusing it would have affected the research value. If *The Fantasy of the Novel*'s purpose is to research the process of creation of an artist's novel, I could not simply fabricate the events. Yet, a completely faithful account would have resulted in the report of a series of incidents, but not necessarily in a novel. As will be discussed in the next chapter, one of the novel's most elementary conventions is that it is not a report of an actual situation or speech, but a simulation. During the writing process there is a reworking of the raw data (notes, video recordings), which results in a coherent narrative – by which I mean a story with contents governed by ideas. A mere relation of consecutive events does not constitute a narrative per se. This is the difference made by Nigel King and Christine Horrocks (2010) between *life as lived* and *life as told*. A story

> is life as told, being narrated in a way that transforms life as lived into a meaningful and interesting account (version) of you and your experiences. This version of events is not necessarily accurate in a realist sense. Rather, we have edited our lives in ways that make sense to us, have value, possibly enhancing our understandings of who we are. (p. 214)

The lived experience must be subjected to a work of selection, framing, condensation, composition, and articulation before it becomes a narrative. For example, most dialogues in my novel are condensations of different conversations held at different times and places. As King and Horrocks put it, a 'narrative configuration' must be organised in relation to a 'thematic thread' in a process that they call 'emplotment' (p. 219). In other words, the narrative contents must be structured in accordance with a plot, in order to avoid what I would call 'the *Headless* situation', in reference to Goldin+Senneby's (2015) artist's novel.

The artist duo devised a project in which a series of art events would take place throughout a number of years. They also hired a ghostwriter, John Barlow, to write a novel based on those events. This is a particularly important detail, since the task Barlow was commissioned for was beyond conventional ghostwriting: he was responsible for fabricating a narrative fiction work from a series of loose events. The problem that he encountered was that waiting for the next situation to be narrated and integrated in a work of fiction hindered the very writing process. *Headless* was a murder mystery in which the ghostwriter did not know the identity of the murderer. In other words, he was commissioned to write a novel without a plot. As a result, from a literary point of view, *Headless* suffers from a lack of consistency: there are many moments in which seemingly high stakes are forgotten some pages later; situations of escalating tension dwindle in innocuous resolutions; nothing amounts to much and the reader feels that the plot is leading nowhere. The secret, of course, is that the narrative's development was subjected to an art project, not a plot, and that last-minute attempts at packaging it as a regular novel did not succeed.[15]

Having researched *Headless* in the essay, and having learned from it, I decided to avoid the same situation by devising a plot for *The Fantasy of the Novel*. Nevertheless, such a decision implied a new incongruity: how to devise a plot if the premise of my research project was to accompany the events as they unfolded? By pre-establishing the course of the narrative I would betray the purpose of my research, which was learning from direct observation. The key to solving such a contradiction laid in what I referred to as a 'careful administration of fiction'.

[15] The fact that it is an artist's novel with all its contradictions and paradoxes, and not a conventional murder mystery novel, is precisely what in my opinion makes *Headless* a fascinating art project. For a full account and critical examination of *Headless*' creative process, see Chapter 6.

As a result, two narrative vectors were created which tend to converge towards the end of the novel. The first vector is a fictional dramatic plot that develops between the three main protagonists. Although it is the product of my imagination, it is inspired by the actual personal dynamics that I observed among the project's participants, which then become exacerbated in the narrative. It enabled me to write in parallel to the actual events whilst keeping a certain consistency in the novel's design, rising conflicts, and characters' development. It also introduced a minimal separation between fact and fiction, permitting a certain capacity to manoeuvre around the events with a higher degree of creativity.

The second narrative vector is a faithful account of the *Tamam Shud* creative process. It tells the story of each of the project's instalments and how they came about as the product of a collective effort. It also tells how the creation of Cecchetti's works is affected by the conditions in which they are produced: budget constrictions, conflicts with the collaborators, relationship with the audience, politics of communication and distribution, and, of course, the larger narrative of which they are a part. It is, in short, the story of the trajectory that goes from the artist's fantasy (how he initially envisioned his artist's novel to exist in the world) to the reality of the work (how it is actually read and received by an audience). *The Fantasy of the Novel* gets increasingly intricate chapter by chapter, connecting recurring images, references, and ideas that reflect the rich complexity of the project.

The fictional frame was not an immutable apparatus designed at the beginning once and for all. On the contrary, it had a dynamic relationship with the events around the *Tamam Shud* project. Whilst the fictional frame helped to organise the new contents that were added as the narrative progressed, the course of the actual events made it necessary to regularly revisit the plot in relation to the changes in the project.

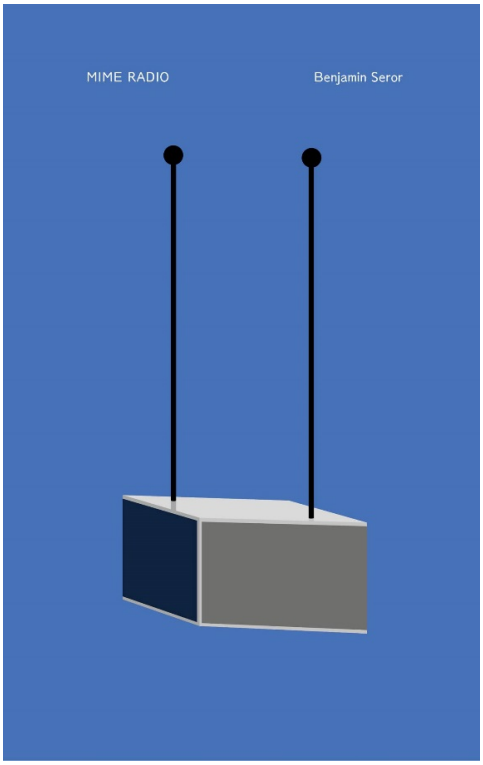
In this chapter I have discussed how the thesis becomes a textual space in which theory and practice, fiction and research, merge. *A New Medium* is a theoretical discussion of the multiple ways in which artists make use of the artist's novel, carried out by means of interviews and a literature review that crucially includes the artists' novels themselves. The notions examined (the introduction of literary conventions in the visual arts; the end of irony; the end of strategies of shock and disturbance; the deceleration of artistic experience; the fantasy of the novel, and so on) are then experienced in practice, expanding the research by means of an art project. By accompanying *Tamam Shud*'s creative process, learning takes place through action

(Barrett, 2007a) that is then written up as research (Smith and Dean, 2009, p. 5). But *The Fantasy of the Novel* is not only the narrative expression of a previous work of research; it is also a form of research in itself. The writing process becomes methodological in that it dictates the contents of the project and the way it is conducted – it is writing as research.

Chapter 3

Benjamin Seror's *Mime Radio*

> A very long moment goes by. They all still feel dizzy. They don't say anything for a long time before suddenly someone says, I think it was David who talked first, "Did you? Did, did, did … What just happened? Did you, did it work for you? The weird …?" And Angie, who is deep in thought, looks at David, "Yes, yes, totally, what was that?" Now that they are over their initial shock, they want to talk about it, all at the same time, "The moment in the song, did you feel it, the moment when he …?" Angie calms down a little and says, "I felt the wind when he was talking about the flickering flame. I felt it, in my eyes. The moment he was talking about colors, blue and yellow, my whole vision turned blue and then yellow.
>
> (Seror, 2015, p. 97)



5. Benjamin Seror (2015) *Mime Radio* [artist's novel].

> Without an audience I could not do it because I need the audience to talk.
>
> Benjamin Seror (interview, p. 146)

Mime Radio (Seror, 2015) is an artist's novel in twelve chapters, created but not written by Benjamin Seror. The artist devised an art project structured in a number of episodic storytelling performances that took place at different locations around the world – art venues and bars – for more than two years. The stories told were part of an overarching plot, so that each performance was the continuation of the previous one, becoming in this way the narration of a whole novel. The sound of every performance was recorded and subsequently transcribed to become one more chapter in *Mime Radio*, the artist's novel.[16]

For Seror, this system responded in the first place to a question of production raised by his pre-*Mime Radio* art practice, which was based on improvised storytelling performances. Nothing remained of his work after each piece, and his dissatisfaction increased as he felt that he was always bound to begin from the same point. Engaging with a long narrative appeared then as a solution, since he would be able to collect the text produced at each performance with the aim to create a tangible piece instead of consigning it to oblivion (Seror, interview, p. 138). It is important to keep in mind that the artist's novel was for him an answer to an artistic problem intrinsic to performance, a means to sustain an eminently immaterial practice.

Between 2012 and 2014 *Mime Radio* (ap) performances took place in Barcelona (Seror, 2012), Rotterdam (2013a), Los Angeles (2013b), New York (2013c), and Amsterdam (2014a; 2014b; 2014c), among other cities. The process was not linear and there is no straight correspondence between performances and published chapters. For example, Seror repeated two chapters he was not satisfied with and, sometimes, he inserted passages of previous chapters in a new performance in order to rewrite them (Seror, interview, p. 146), creating a situation that poses a serious challenge to any attempt at retracing the project's trajectory. Below, there is a tentative reconstruction. Some chapters are not fully documented and their information remains ambiguous.

[16] *Mime Radio* is the title of both the artist's novel and the performative art project. To avoid confusion, in this chapter *Mime Radio* (an) will be used to refer to the artist's novel, whereas *Mime Radio* (ap) will be used to refer to the art project. When not specified, *Mime Radio* will refer to both the artist's novel and art project.

***Mime Radio*: project trajectory**

Chapter I — Paris, Bernard Rüdiger Studio, or: Place de Clichy Poetry Club, or: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris.

Chapter II — Barcelona, Fabra i Coats. In: *This Is Not an Art Exhibition, Even* [exhibition]. 28 September 2012–27 January 2013. https://vimeo.com/53410515 [Accessed 11/01/2017].

Chapter III — Paris, Bernard Rüdiger Studio, or: Place de Clichy Poetry Club, or: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris.

Chapter IV — The Hague, Walden Affairs. 3 March 2013. In: *Shelter* [exhibition], curated by Mark Geffriaud. 26 January–3 March 2013.

Chapter V — Rotterdam, De Schouw. 20 April 2013, 7pm. In: *A Thing at a Time* [performance programme], curated by Heman Chong for Witte de With. http://www.wdw.nl/en/participants/benjamin_seror [Accessed 11/01/2017].

Chapter VI — The Hague, Walden Affairs. Not confirmed.

Chapter VII — Los Angeles, LACE. In: *LA Existancial* [exhibition], curated by Marie de Brugerolle. 16 January–3 March 2013. https://vimeo.com/64192180 [Accessed 11/01/2017].

Chapter VIII — New York, Dexter Sinister. Not confirmed.

Chapter IX — New York, Dexter Sinister. *Marsyas' Warning*. 6 July 2013, 6pm. http://www.dextersinister.org/index.html?id=280 [Accessed 11/01/2017].

Chapter X — Amsterdam, Kunstverein. 11 June 2014, 7.30pm. http://kunstverein.nl/past-events [Accessed 11/01/2017].

Chapter XI — Amsterdam, Kunstverein. 20 June 2014, 7.30pm. http://kunstverein.nl/past-events [Accessed 11/01/2017].

Chapter XII — Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, Teijin Auditorium. 26 June 2014, 8pm. https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/65471 [Accessed 25/06/2018].

Other venues where performances took place but that I have not been able to place in the trajectory are: CRAC Alsace, Altkirch; Institut supérieur des arts de Toulouse; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff; École nationale supérieure des beaus-arts de Lyon; and Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius (8 September 2012). Most likely, these chapters were re-performed afterwards in another venue from the list above.

Mime Radio (an) tells the story of a group of friends who meet each other in the Tiki Coco bar, in Los Angeles. Bernhardt, the owner, organises the Challenge the Reality Open Mic competition every evening. It is a stage where anyone can present their inventions, which, as a general rule, defy rationality. Four of the presenters (David, Angie, Benjamin Serror,[17] and Bernhardt himself) become friends and set themselves the task of helping a fifth member of the group, Marsyas, recover his voice. Marsyas is the mythical satyr who lost a music competition against Apollo. He has subsisted until today, roaming the world aimlessly in the form of a nearly invisible nervous system. When they finally succeed in bringing his voice back, Marsyas sings again after thousands of years of silence. The audience discovers that his voice has the capacity to render visible anything that he sings about. At first, it is only about images, but eventually the effects of his lyrics affect reality, to the point of creating an invasion of monsters that have been bred by the audience's imagination and inner fears. The crisis is only resolved with Marsyas' sacrifice, which restores reality to the normal order of things.

In the interview that I conducted with the artist, he insists: 'I am a writer who needs an audience to be able to begin to write. I'm not a writer who writes alone' (Seror, interview, p. 137). When he decided to create a novel, he did not vary his artistic methods. He is a performance artist and he continued working as such in order to produce the narrative text. Seror did not sit down at a desk to write on a stack of blank pages – instead, he made use of the artistic tools at his disposal, namely storytelling performance. Each evening he had a rough idea of the piece of plot that was going to be elaborated, but the creation of the narrative itself depended on the course of the performance. Seror aimed to provoke an emotional reaction in the audience to which he, in turn, could react in order to continue the improvised storytelling in one direction or another. Similar to a stand-up comedian who observes the audience's response to her performance and adjusts it accordingly, Seror needs the live feedback of his public in order to orientate the development of his narrative.

[17] Benjamin Serror, not to be mistaken for the artist Benjamin Seror. Serror establishes a link between the world of *Mime Radio* and the actual world, which causes him to confuse reality and fiction. Serror is Seror's projection inside the fiction and they are never too far from each other. Serror lives in Ghent, just about 30 kilometres from Seror, who lives in Brussels.

Sometimes he would resort to devices other than verbal narration, such as the use of props and music (see Figures 6, 7, and 28). The props, which he calls ‘Notes’ (Seror, 2012–15), are models of the fictional spaces where the action takes place, which served to give him the cues during the performances and allowed him an overview and to keep track of the plot (Seror, interview, pp. 147–148). They also have a life of their own in the form of an aggregative installation that has been displayed at different art exhibitions (Figures 8, 9, and 29). Significantly, Seror employed sculpture and installation instead of writing preparatory notes before each chapter. The art project (performance, installation) became a writing technique that produced the narrative text. As Robert Smithson (1996) stated, ‘Here language is built, not written’ (p. 61).

In order to discuss how the artist’s novel is imbricated with the art project, it is necessary to examine the notion of performativity in Seror’s work. Ute Berns (2014) defines the two possible meanings of the term:

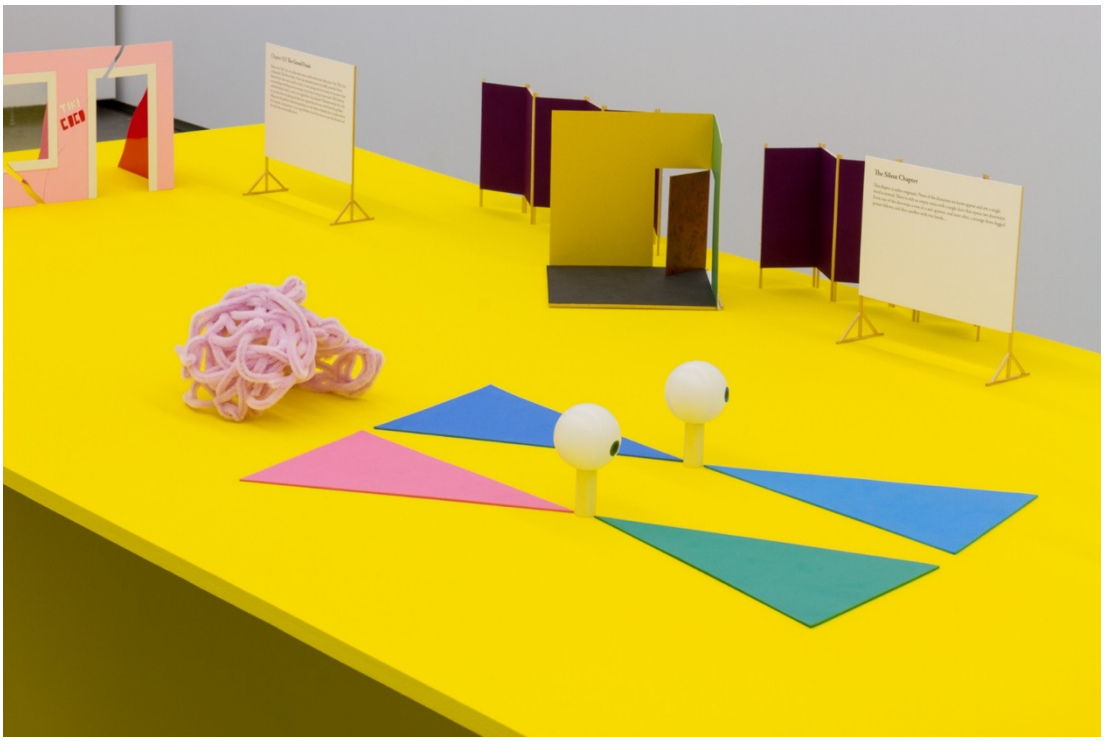
> Performativity I refers to the performance of a narrative, i.e. to its fully embodied, live enactment in front of an audience in a real world context or on stage. … Performativity II refers to the illusion of a performance created in non-corporeal presentations of a narrative, e.g. in writing, cartoons or film. (p. 681)

The present chapter will follow this twofold definition of performativity to analyse Seror’s work:

Mime Radio	Performativity I: performance art / post-performance	
	Performativity II:	Locutionary: act of narrating / phatic act
		Illocutionary: fiction as performative
		Perlocutionary: effects on the audience

6. Benjamin Seror (2014a) *Mime Radio, Chapter X* [performance]. Kunstverein, Amsterdam, 11 June. Photo: David Maroto.

7. Benjamin Seror (2014b) *Mime Radio, Chapter XI* [performance]. Kunstverein, Amsterdam, 20 June. Photo: Ernst van Deursen.



8. Benjamin Seror (2012–15) *Notes for Mime Radio* [installation]. 221A, Vancouver. Photo: Dennis Ha.

9. Benjamin Seror (2012–15) *Notes for Mime Radio* [installation]. Le Quartier CAC, Quimper. Photo: Emile Ouroumov.

In *Mime Radio* (ap) Performativity I is expressed in a series of storytelling performances that corresponds with to the notion of post-performance. Marie de Brugerolle, Marie Canet, and Catherine Wood (2014) coined this term to distinguish it from performance art, which would refer to a historically identifiable artistic trend developed between the 1950s and 1970s. The difference between performance art and post-performance is equivalent to that between medium-specificity and the post-medium condition. Post-performance is characterised by a 'performative attitude' less interested in searching for the specificity of performance as a medium than in exploring a field that connects with other artistic media, such as video, text, sculpture, and installation. Post-performance acknowledges the influence of a visual milieu that has become all pervasive in contemporary culture: television, film, commercials, and the Internet are part of a media environment in which post-performance integrates itself. De Brugerolle identifies its origin in the 1990s, with Guy de Cointet as the precursor who opened up performance art to 'the televised model, with an awareness of film filtered by mass culture' (p. 167). It is possible to trace an artistic lineage that goes from de Cointet to Seror, via de Brugerolle. The fact that Seror was a student of de Brugerolle, that she is the author of a monograph about de Cointet (de Brugerolle, 2011), and that both Seror and de Cointet are French performance artists who worked in Los Angeles are factors that, I believe, have conditioned Seror's artistic development.

Ute Berns (2014) relates Performativity II to the narrative representations that evoke a performance in the mind of the reader or spectator (p. 681). In order to understand this second instance of performativity in Seror's project, it will be useful to refer to J.L. Austin's (1976) speech act theory, according to which two sorts of utterances exist: constative and performative. Constatives always relate to an existing state of affairs and can be either true or false, as in 'Benjamin studied in Lyon'. Performatives actually execute the action that they refer to, as in 'I bet you five dollars'. Here, I am not only stating that I bet five dollars, I am in fact doing so through the very act of saying it. Performatives are neither true nor false in relation to a given state of things, they inaugurate a new reality by the force of their utterance. 'I now pronounce you husband and wife' effectively changes the marital status of a couple upon uttering these words at the end of a wedding ceremony.

Nevertheless, Austin recognises the difficulty of consolidating a coherent set of criteria to formally differentiate performatives from constatives. He thus proceeds to

elaborate a more nuanced classification in locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts (p. 94).

There is a certain aspect of *Mime Radio* (ap) that happens at the locutionary level, namely the act of speaking in front of an audience. This is not yet the illocutionary force that tells a story. In fact, *Mime Radio*'s (an) narrative is often interrupted by expressions such as 'Check, check, one two, one two, one two. Can you hear me well?' (Seror, 2015, p. 7) and 'Can you still hear me if I talk like this?' (p. 117), which do not belong to the depiction of the fictional world to be pictured in the reader's imagination. They are expressions originally aimed at the audience of his performances, instances of the phatic function of language, which primarily serves to check whether the channel of communication is in good order (Jakobson, 1960; Malinowski, 1949).

About the use of such phatic expressions, Seror (interview) maintains that

> It's not really focused on writing anything. It's very clear that the first thing that is done is to check that the microphone works, to check that there's sync with the audience. That's the pact with the audience that is listening: the voice of the character that you're listening [to] is the voice of someone who is telling the story in a bar with a microphone. (p. 144)

Terry Eagleton (2012) labels this use of language as performative: 'So-called phatic speech acts … refer to the act of communication itself, so that the meaning of what is said is at one with the performance' (p. 147). If Seror employed performative phatic expressions, it is because they established a connection with the audience that was indispensable to produce the text.

With the same purpose, he appropriated resources from television (de Brugerolle, Canet, and Wood, 2014, p. 167), which is a medium where the phatic function of language is predominant over the communicative and what is said is not as important as addressing the viewer directly, acknowledging their existence and maintaining, in so doing, the viewer's attention for as long as possible (González Requena, 1999).

From this viewpoint, *Mime Radio* (an) 'is pretty much like a television show' (Seror, interview, p. 138). There are many passages that are described as if they were extracted from one, e.g.: 'When we would finally know the truth about the Solog

House, the camera will zoom out and some music will start playing' (Seror, 2015, p. 55). 'It's confusing because they are both in the frame, at the same time. It's a split screen. Yes, a split screen, which is difficult to make when you are telling a story' (p. 70). Often, the chapters begin with a summary of the plot told so far, which for the reader is obviously unnecessary, but is there because in each performance the audience was different and needed a recapitulation in order to make sense of the storytelling that was about to be delivered. Such passages would be the equivalent to a television series' preliminary summary of previous episodes.

One of *Mime Radio*'s main themes is the possibility of enabling phatic contact between the characters. One of them, David, invents the 'though transmitters' (pp. 71–72). Although they are not a real device but a simple cardboard model, they have the ability to connect people's minds. Simply by pretending to use them, people can share their ideas. Seror wished to create the same bond with the audience, for which he used an actual model of the thought transmitters during his performances, thus introducing a fictional object in reality. 'When I was making the model I began to be interested by the idea that some objects could go out of the novel. They could be in the book and be used in 1:1 scale. I just like the idea of [a] different status of reality of things' (Seror, interview, p. 148). Such use of fiction brings us to the illocutionary level in *Mime Radio*.

In illocutionary acts we do something in saying something. Austin (1976) gives a number of examples: 'Asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention, pronouncing sentence, making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism, making an identification or giving a description' (pp. 98–99). In principle, Austin considers speech act theory to be about 'seriously' spoken language only, by which he explicitly excludes literature. In his opinion, literary language is parasitic to its use in ordinary circumstances and, in this sense, is equivalent to a joke (p. 22). In spite of this, subsequent developments in literary theory and criticism found the notion of performative language applicable to literary discourse (Sedgwick and Parker, 1995).

Jonathan Culler (2000) and Terry Eagleton (2012) have argued in favour of the performative nature of literary fiction. For Culler, the power of fiction consists in bringing 'into being characters and events' that did not exist before (p. 510).

> Like the performative, the literary utterance does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false. The literary utterance, too, *creates* the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions. (p. 506, italics in the original)

In a similar vein, Eagleton (2012) contends that

> Literary speech acts belong to the larger class of verbal acts known as performatives, which do not describe the world but accomplish something in the act of saying. … A work of fiction, likewise, consists of a set of realities which have no existence apart from in its act of enunciation. (pp. 131–132)

Similarly to performatives at the illocutionary level, a fictional world exists only in the performative act of its utterance. Fiction establishes a moment of production of a new reality, it is 'an event inseparable from its act of utterance. It has no support from outside itself, in the sense that what it asserts cannot be checked off in any important way against some independent testimony' (pp. 137–138).

Consequently, the illocutionary level in *Mime Radio* exists in the story that is presented first to the live audience during each performance and afterwards to the readers of the artist's novel. In a rather self-referential manner, *Mime Radio*'s central theme is about fiction's power to produce real effects – quite literally, as in the Solog House: 'Bernhard's idea of a house based on language is that inside the house, only language is real. The house is completely empty and when you arrive in the main room you can say, "Oh, I would like a chair," and a chair appears' (Seror, 2015, p. 54). The same theme is explored most prominently in the 'Marsyas effect'. Once the satyr recovers his voice, it displays a startling generative ability: when his audience listens to his description of an object, it is pictured in their minds as clearly as a real object. In a dramatic turn of the plot, the audience are able to conjure up unconscious fears in the form of monsters that threaten to destroy the city they live in. As Marsyas points out, 'You could get killed by fiction' (p. 122).

In his performances and artist's novel, Seror sought to establish a connection similar to that between Marsyas and his audience. The process by which fiction is able to bring into the world something that did not exist before rests upon two fundamental faculties, namely the audience's (or the reader's) imagination and identification. They are activated at the perlocutionary level, which consists in achieving something

by saying something, and is located in the effect of the utterance on the audience, who might get convinced, persuaded, surprised, misled, etc. (Austin, 1976, p. 109).

How does this apply to *Mime Radio* (an)? In his analysis of the act of reading, Wolfgang Iser (1978) explains how the contents of the narrative stimulate a sequence of mental images in the reader's mind:

> The reader is situated in such a position that he can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him. But since this meaning is neither a given external reality nor a copy of an intended reader's own world, it is something that has to be ideated by the mind of the reader. A reality that has not existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader's consciousness. (p. 38)

Imagination is able to make present things that are absent (Eagleton, 2012, p. 61; Iser, 1978, p. 137). Therefore, it is a powerful instrument to propose alternative realities to the world inhabited by the reader. But fiction's capacity to stimulate imagination and generate new possibilities for a transformative action must be first of all activated by the reader's identification. Identification is closely related to narrative empathy, which is the ability, induced by narrative means, to share the feeling and perspective of being in another's situation and condition (Keen, 2014). At some point in the story, David, one of *Mime Radio*'s characters, 'wonders if you can actually see through the eyes of someone else, and, by extension, what it would be like to, for example, suffer someone else's toothache' (Seror, 2015, p. 83).

In this regard, Catherine Wilson (1983) asserts that, in seeing the world through somebody else's vision, the reader is able to revise and modify her own conceptions and conducts in light of the alternative presented by the work of fiction. According to Wilson, that which the reader learns is not *how* to do something, or *that* something happened, but *what it is like to* experience something (pp. 491–492). In this way fiction fulfils the performative at the perlocutionary level: by achieving an actual change in the reader's subjectivity that could lead, eventually, to undertaking real action.

The exploration of faculties such as identification and narrative empathy has been marginal in the visual arts for a long time. Now, they instate a relationship between Seror and his public governed by trust and a positive concept of the audience. In

relation to this issue, Seror (interview) commented on an anecdote during one of his performances:

> Three years ago, during a performance that I was doing in the opening of the Lyon Biennial, there was an old Fluxus guy. And he told a friend of mine: 'But this guy … I really don't like him. He's so nice to the audience [laughs]. That's so boring, it needs some friction.' (p. 146)

Indeed, for a Fluxus artist, as for most artists of his generation, the relationship with the spectator was mainly based on creating shock, frustration, or exhaustion. In *Boredom and Danger*, Dick Higgins (1968) recalls a number of examples of performances by John Cage, Emmet Williams, Eric Andersen, Nam June Paik, and Tomas Schmit, among others, in which 'the audience became bored, impatient and upset' (p. 3). Shock and boredom are two sides of the same strategy, which elicits irritation in the audience and aims to block their capacity for a meaningful response (Brill, 2010; Ngai, 2000).

Seror, however, does not want to *épater le bourgeois*. There is a lot of humour in *Mime Radio* that reveals the determination to provide an enjoyable experience. Such strategy is at odds with the modernistic tradition of disruption, according to which the artist's mission consists in challenging and disturbing, when not directly punishing, the spectator. Grant H. Kester (2011) has reflected on the limitations of this paradigm that originated in the times of the historical avant-garde. Strategies of confrontation might perhaps have been effective at the time when the art audience was identified with a stereotypical bourgeois spectator. Today, this conception has derived in a cliché rooted in the inertia of the art world rather than in a serious consideration of the contemporary art viewer. It is an assumed commonplace that it is the artist's duty to unveil aspects of reality to which the ignorant spectator remains insensitive. For this, she will not hesitate to resort to strategies of shock intended to disturb or scandalise the spectator's supposed middle-class alienated vision. Kester questions whether the 'pedagogy of punishment' actually leads to an epiphanic revelation rather than simple defensiveness (pp. 183–184).

This view is supported by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), who deems the rhetoric of exposure and revelation as paranoid, and juxtaposes them with 'reparative knowing,

which is driven by the desire to ameliorate or give pleasure'.[18] The still currently valued 'tough, disruptive approach and agonistic conflict' (Kester, 2011, p. 61) does not consider that the art spectator may very well be used to this game, or in fact expect it, and not be disturbed in the least. The conception of the implied spectator has become in this way an objectification of the viewing subject, an abstraction cemented on a long tradition of harassment and disruption. The intention of provoking the spectator is a notion defied by *Mime Radio*, where the bond with the audience is based on empathy and mutual collaboration.

In *Mime Radio* (an) the new terms of the relation between artist and spectator are based on the act of reading. Readability is a concept advanced by Roland Barthes (2010) in his three 'writing behaviours' for the novel: namely being 'readable, non-ironic and written at face value' (pp. 299–301), which are in turn connected to his criterion for the novel to be desirable, that is, that it wants to be read and gives reading pleasure (Briggs, 2011, para. 7).

In *Mime Radio* (an) the textual material designates instructions for the production of meaning, so that the reader's involvement is essential to actualise its potential (Iser, 1978, pp. 65–66). Thus, for Seror (interview) it is imperative that his audience engages with the artist's novel by actually reading it:

> I have the desire to tell a twelve-part story, and to structure it, and the model of the novel is a way to structure it. But the thing at the end won't be an object that is to look at to think of the image of a novel. It's a story that you need to read; it's a project that you need to read in order to get in it. (p. 142)

Mime Radio (an) is meant to be read. It is not a concept that can be condensed into a blurb. Its meaning emerges as an effect that is apprehended through the reading experience (Iser, 1978). This characteristic is at odds with the premises of Conceptual Art and, therefore, the abundant contemporary art production that stems from its legacy (Price, 2015b, p. 111), in which the work is reduced to an idea and the artistic experience is rendered either redundant or unnecessary. Consider, for instance, On Kawara's *One Million Years* (1969–81): the spectator is not supposed

[18] This quotation comes in fact from Grant H. Kester's *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (2011, p. 53). I have chosen to use it instead of Sedgwick's original phrasing because Kester neatly summarises her extensive arguments in a single sentence. The original cite appears in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003, p. 144).

to read its twenty volumes in order to grasp the contents of the work; they are synthesised in a concept that, once understood, fulfils the artistic experience. The artwork is not something to experience, but an idea to speak about.

Given Seror's aspirations for readability, the product of his performative art project had to resemble a novel as much as possible. To achieve this, he collaborated with an editor, Clare Noonan, who took care of transcribing and editing the performances' recordings (Seror, interview, p. 139, p. 145). With the intention to keep the 'flavour' of Seror's particular use of language and the freshness of its emergence through improvisation, her task was not to rewrite the source text but to rid from it some expressions that were employed during the performances and were still present in the transcriptions: jokes that Seror made for the live audience in order to stimulate their engagement, as well as the many repetitions, nervous laughter, coughs, and stammering that would have resulted in too much textual noise for the narrative to flow. They may have helped the performance to be a successful event but, when kept in the artist's novel, would have only hindered the reading experience. 'It would be extremely difficult to read if it was not cleaned out, so basically the editing consists in cleaning it in a way that it becomes a text' (p. 143). 'The rule has been more or less … to edit out the contemporary moment, the moment that was then and there, which makes the performance' (p. 145). Noonan's mission consisted in removing the actual, preterite moment of the performance from the narrative, so that only the fictional atemporality remained, which can then be actualised by each reader.[19]

The editor is thus a crucial figure in the process of creation of an artist's novel, albeit hidden from public view. Knowledgeable about the novel's literary conventions, the editor anticipates the critical reaction of the future reader, contributing coherency and structure to the text, which, more often than not, comes out of the artist's hands as impenetrable (Soobramanien, interview, p. 182, p. 183). The editor's work is indispensable in the trajectory that goes from the initial artist's fantasy of the novel to its final outcome, because readability is a condition for accessibility, which, in turn, is a fundamental element in such a fantasy. In the analysis of a collaborative project such as an artist's novel, the editor's role is comparable to that of the curator. Although the editor's work will be further explicated in Chapter 4 (with the 'Copy

[19] However, the removal of the temporary markers was not systematic. Some were left in the text, as for example the aforementioned phatic expressions, which anchor the artist's novel text to its performative origin.

Editor') and in Chapter 6 (with Alexander Provan), it will be illuminating at this point to examine what happens when an artist decides to dispense with an editor, as in Andy Warhol's *a, A Novel* (1968).[20]

That issues of readability have not been in the agenda of visual artists for a long time becomes evident when comparing *Mime Radio* (an) to *a, A Novel*. Although the premises of both Seror's and Warhol's projects are similar, the results are extremely different. Reva Wolf (1997) explains how Warhol handed a sound recorder to one of the Factory's actors, called Ondine. The intention was to respond to James Joyce's *Ulysses* by transcribing twenty-four hours of Ondine's life into a book. Unlike Seror, Warhol did not resort to any kind of editing process. The dialogues were transcribed literally, retaining 'all the disorderliness and minutiae of the everyday that is life' (p. 142), which, in fact, render the book utterly unreadable, very much as Warhol's films are unwatchable. The differential factor between both projects is what Kester (2011) calls 'ironic distanciation'. Warhol intended to make an ironic comment on literature, hence the need to clarify the word 'novel' in the title. A novel does not hold an exact correspondence to the real world and therefore is not a report of actual speech, not even an imitation of it, but a simulation (Oatley, 1994). In obvious disregard for such literary conventions, Warhol did not expect to create any kind of readership but rather to inculcate a sceptical distance defined in terms of opacity, estrangement, and confusion (Kester, 2011, p. 32).

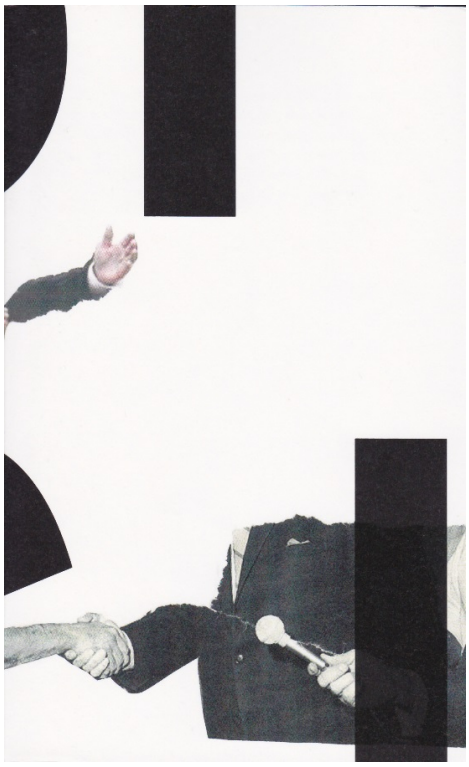
This sort of art is in line with the modernistic tradition of disruption discussed above. It aspires to induce awkwardness and, in so doing, cancels out the spectator's experience of the work. Such a tradition, I want to argue, has reached a point of exhaustion. The artist's novel is a symptom of a new paradigm where the relationship with the spectator is not defined in terms of critique, shock, and confrontation, but rather by imagination, collaboration, and empathic connection. First the audience's and then the reader's engagement are governed by enjoyment. Immersive experience, unlike ironic distance, is central to actualise the performative potential of fiction and its effects at the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary level, whereby the artist's novel is able to induce actual changes in reality. From this viewpoint, *Mime Radio* appears as an attempt to stop challenging the spectator and begin challenging reality instead.

[20] For further discussion of the editor's participation in the creative process, see my interview with Natasha Soobramanien in the Appendix.

Chapter 4

Cally Spooner's *Collapsing in Parts*

> 'Here at the company we deliver only the highest performers. We endorse only the highest performing products. We are affiliated only with those who deliver, and if you're telling me you can't do this,' he picks up his coat, 'our friendship is over.'
>
> 'Noooooo!' cries the Golfer. 'Harold, please, I can do this, I can, I just need … something. I just need to play!'
>
> (Spooner, 2013a, p. 91)



10. Cally Spooner (2013a) *Collapsing in Parts* [artist's novel].

> Everybody is like: 'Oh, I want to write a novel.' You know, it's like the thing everybody wants to do, isn't it? And everyone is supposed to have a novel in them. I don't know, I just had this weird desire to write.
>
> Cally Spooner (interview, p. 149)

In June 2011 Cally Spooner began an eight-month art project in International Project Space, a public gallery in Birmingham. The project revolved around the writing of an artist's novel called *Collapsing in Parts* (Spooner, 2013a), which was published online in monthly episodes as it was being written – its eight parts corresponding to the eight-month scheme. The project culminated with the publication of the complete artist's novel as a paperback book edition (thus not only online), a solo exhibition (International Project Space, 2012), and a feature-length film also titled *Collapsing in Parts* (Spooner, 2012b; Figure 13).[21]

In the artist's novel *Collapsing in Parts*, a Writer wants to write a story in which the fundamental ideas of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* are applied to fiction. However, writing is a constant struggle for her, so she seeks advice from the Copy Editor. In the process she begins three stories that are left unfinished. The first one is about the Screenwriter, a Hollywood script writer who is offered the chance to overcome his long-lasting writer's block with the commission of a musical about World War I. The second story is about the Golfer, a successful elite sportsman who, even though he should be physically recovered from a minor muscle injury, does not feel up to picking up the golf clubs again. The third story is about the Politician. He rehearses his conservative speeches at home with his wife Frances as his only respondent.

Spooner's intention was to explore 'some foundational ideas around public-ness and performance from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*' (Spooner, 2013b, para. 5). Performance is here a polysemous term whose meaning varies according to the field where it is employed – e.g. as synonymous of capitalist efficiency (de Brugerolle, Canet, and Wood, 2014, p. 163; Sedgwick and Parker, 1995, p. 2). From this viewpoint, the characters are divided in two groups: those who are unable to produce what is expected from them (the Writer, the Screenwriter, the Golfer) and

[21] *Collapsing in Parts* is the title of both the artist's novel and the art project. In this chapter, '*Collapsing in Parts*' will refer to the artist's novel. When referring to the art project, this will be clearly indicated.

those who exert pressure on the first group to be productive (the Copy Editor, Harry the Producer, Burson, Murphy and Green, and the Politician).

The Writer is portrayed as a young female who loses control of herself easily each time that she gets stuck in her writing, which happens all too often: 'I'm telling you, as soon as I type this fucking thing up, it's going to be shit' (Spooner, 2013a, p. 17). The Copy Editor is a male, judgmental character, who exceeds the role of a mere text corrector. He gives his view on content, strategy, and structure, usually in a harsh way and against the Writer's expectations. He calls her ideas 'lazy' (p. 36, p. 77), her characters 'flat' and 'boring' (p. 17), and believes that people will hate the novel (p. 20). Unlike Clare Noonan's friendly editorial role in *Mime Radio*, the Copy Editor is here an authoritarian voice with a relentless demand 'to perform simply, straightforwardly, and with efficiency' (Spooner, interview, p. 153). The artist's initial enthusiasm ('I want to write a novel!') is tamed by the Copy Editor's severe observations: 'He reminds me I have no experience and no research so I shouldn't do this' (Spooner, 2013a, p. 11). Paradoxically, the Writer needs him in order not to fall into self-indulgence, like her characters do when they have the chance. As Spooner (interview) puts it:

> I wanted to make the project because I wanted to see whether or not I could write a novel. It was a bit of a performance challenge, because I just had this desire to sit down and write a lot, but I knew that I wouldn't do it unless I made myself, or unless there was some structure in place that would force me to write for a month, or some kind of public pressure to live up to something. (p. 149)

The Writer has set the goal of writing a novel in a pre-established time frame. The refusal to take her time and calmly write it in the privacy of her studio can only be explained by assuming that the Writer is not an invented character but a projection of the real Cally Spooner in the fiction, which leads one to consider the real conditions of the novel's production, the project at International Project Space, as the fiction's backstory.

Throughout the writing process, Spooner organised a series of five public events called 'Footnotes', which 'sought to push the interior act of writing into more discursive realms of public performance' (Butler, 2013, p. 167). In the artists' own words: 'Across the span of the project the solitary writing activity was accompanied

by a series of live Footnote “events” which functioned as performative demonstrations of ideas explored in the novella’ (Spooner, 2013b, para. 5). Such events literally functioned as footnotes to the artist’s novel’s text, addressing and expanding Spooner’s research on particular issues at a greater detail than it was possible to develop in the narrative (Spooner, interview, pp. 151–152).

The Footnotes included performances, conversations, a graphic poster, a group exhibition, and a theatre production carried out at different art venues (International Project Space, 2012, para. 2). For example, Footnote 5 (Spooner, 2012a; Figure 12) became a musical vaudeville play, and Footnote 2 (Spooner, 2011; Figure 11) consisted in a conversation held with another artist about theatre, politicians, and the potential of unfulfillable promises. The conversation was transcribed and illustrated into a graphic poster that was publicly distributed by post (Butler, 2013). Below I am including a reconstruction of the project’s trajectory:

Footnote 1. *An Extraordinarily Unnecessary Interlude to Civility (Almost a One Act Play)*. Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 15 July 2011. A piece for the theatre representing a looping micro-crisis between two states, the life of the mind, and life with others.

Footnote 2. *The Erotics of Public Possibility*. International Project Space, Birmingham, 2011. Conversation at the breakfast table, typeset and illustrated into a graphic poster, distributed as a live event by post.

Footnote 3. *It's 1957, and the Press Release Still Isn't Written*. WCW Gallery, Hamburg, 2 December 2011–20 January 2012. Ten-week reading group, group exhibition arranged by Cally Spooner, and live press release/performance.

Footnote 4. *And Yet, There They Still Are!* LUX, London, 27 September 2012. Public conversation and screening programme with feature films, news clips, and music performances about the relationship between public performance and its effects.

Footnote 5. *A Six Stage Manifesto on Action*. ICA, London, 24 March 2012. Part musical theatre production, part live rehearsal for a feature film, Footnote 5 took the form of a sketch show for a solo performer and multiple musicians.

11. Cally Spooner (2011) *Footnote 2: The Erotics of Public Possibility* [graphic poster]. International Project Space, Birmingham.

12. Cally Spooner (2012a) *Footnote 5: A Six Stage Manifesto on Action* [performance]. ICA, London, 24 March.

13. Cally Spooner (2012b) *Collapsing in Parts* [video installation]. HD video, 1 h. 22 min., sound, colour.

Spooner 'approached the notion of performance as a promise' (International Project Space, 2012, para. 1). She exposed the writing process, both in the artist's novel's narrative and by means of the Footnotes, in order to get the necessary energy from the awareness of being watched. This energy came from the anxiety of having promised to deliver a novel as part of an art project in a given and rather challenging time frame, and the disclosure of her own inability to fulfil such a promise.

> The places where it [*Collapsing in Parts*] falls short are the moments where the expectations of a great novel, like detail or elegance, or like the ability to write precisely, it just kind of short-circuits, and it's like: 'Oh no, I can't do that, it doesn't work.' … I was more interested in the challenge of actually writing the novel and wanting the promise that the novel would arrive. (Spooner, interview, p. 150)

Spooner's project is not so much about the novel as a finalised product as about the writing process taken as a performative event. Her promise has the binding effect of a contract signed with the International Project Space and its audience. By exploring Hanna Arendt's concepts in practice, Spooner suggests that excellence in performance is the result of a task imposed by external contractors and can only take place in the public realm: 'It's got personally to do with knowing that I wouldn't write unless I was under the duress of public expectation, somehow' (Spooner, interview, p. 153).

Earlier, I quoted Daniel Kunitz' (2011) argument about contemporary artists: 'The crucial point is that writing is the distinctive characteristic of these artists' practice, not text per se' (p. 52). Spooner corroborates this when she affirms that she thinks of text and writing as events (2013b, para. 5). But it is important to remember here that writing is not a solitary activity carried out in isolation (Spooner, 2012c, para. 4). Insofar as it is an art project, the process must be performed in public view. As Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) claims, 'The most common denominator shared by all artists is that they *show* something. The act of showing suffices to define the artist' (p. 108, italics in the original). The Footnotes and the feature-length film fulfil this aspect by rendering the writing process visible to an audience.

The writing process is also disclosed in the artist's novel's text. Through the dialogues between Writer and Copy Editor, which are held in a homey environment, the reader witnesses the writing process in all its mundaneness: 'I can't think of a

good response, so he puts on the kettle and feeds the cat' (Spooner, 2013a, p. 20). It is the opposite of mystifying the artist's creative process. *Collapsing in Parts* exposes the moments of doubt, anger, and silly ideas that any creator goes through but afterwards conceals from public view, sometimes with brutal honesty: 'I should keep notes on these things. But then I've only read about it on Wikipedia' (p. 43).

If Spooner's interest is located in the process of writing (specifically, a novel), it seems reasonable to enquire about the origin of her desire to write. The artist states that 'it first came out of just wanting to see if I could write. I have always read fiction. I read a lot and I had always wanted to write' (Spooner, interview, p. 149). But why would a visual artist feel compelled to do such thing in the first place? To answer this question, it is first necessary to clarify a key concept in my thesis, that of the *fantasy of the novel*.

Fantasy is a term that comes from psychoanalysis. Freud used it on different occasions throughout his oeuvre, each time developing a different aspect of it, e.g.: 'The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality' (Freud, 1959a, p. 146).[22] 'Phantasies are satisfactions of wishes proceeding from deprivation and longing. They are justly called "day-dreams"' (1959b, p. 159). '[Fantasies] are highly organized, free from self-contradiction, have made use of every acquisition of the system *Cs.* [consciousness] and would hardly be distinguished in our judgement from the formations of that system' (1957, p. 190).

Based on the systematic compilation of such occurrences in Freud's work, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis (1988) were able to define fantasy as the 'Imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish' (p. 314). Fantasy is thus an imaginary scenario that does not account for the difficulties that it will encounter when attempting to be played out in reality (p. 315).

In short, as noted by Slavoj Žižek, fantasy is a *mise-en-scène* of desire. By structuring and organising our desire, it teaches us how to desire (2006, p. 47; 2008, p. 132).

[22] Freud's English translator used 'phantasy'. I prefer using the more current, widely accepted 'fantasy'.

Taking his cue from the concept of fantasy, Roland Barthes (2010) wonders about the conditions under which it is possible to begin to write or, in other words, about the origin of the desire to write:

> A sexual fantasy = a scenario with a subject (me) and a typical object (a part of the body, a practice, a situation), where pleasure is produced by that conjunction → Writing Fantasy = me producing a "literary object," that is to say, writing it (here, as always, the fantasy erases the difficulties, the failures), or, rather, being on the point of finishing it … (note that I'm saying: *fantasy* of a poem, *fantasy* of a novel). (p. 10, italics in the original)

Barthes maintains that fantasy is an energy, a motor that 'keeps things going', an initiatory guide to writing that, in order to function, must remain in its imaginary status. The moment it is put in practice it comes into conflict with reality and ceases to be a fantasy. It will result in something, but what it produces in real terms no longer has to do with the initially fantasised novel (p. 11).

We can now return to analyse Cally Spooner's fantasy of the novel, as she pictures it:

> When I wrote it, my goal was to write something that you would be able to buy at WHSmith [laughs], you know, just like a real high street bookshop. I just wanted to do that and I still like that idea. Even with my designer, I was like: 'No, I just want it to look like you're able to buy it at WHSmith.' (Spooner, interview, p. 154)

Spooner's imagined scenario depicts *Collapsing in Parts* being available to any casual buyer who is searching for something to read. WHSmith is not the place where one goes in search of specific artistic literature, let alone artists' novels. Spooner's fantasy consisted in writing a novel that, unlike the rest of her artworks, could be widely distributed and read by anyone. In other words, hers was a fantasy of *accessibility*.

Enlarging the field of contact with a larger audience is an ambition long shared by visual artists (Siegelaub, 2015, pp. 133–134). The desire for increased accessibility is spurred by the wish to overcome the traditional opposition between high art and popular art, effective since at least the eighteenth century (Fisher, 2005, p. 529). The classification of the visual arts within high art has, in the long run, 'resulted in a

loss of power and appeal' (Shusterman, 2003, p. 299), and of social significance (Benjamin, 1999, p. 227), because high art is aligned with values such as sophistication, specialised knowledge, difficulty to be comprehended, and, therefore, inaccessibility and elitism (Bourdieu, 1984). As Noël Carroll (1998) puts it, high art is 'something that demands deciphering—something that is difficult for the ordinary viewer to understand and interpret without instruction' (p. 209).

Cally Spooner's motivation to overcome elitism is in accordance with her use of language. Her nonchalant style (expressed both in our interview and in the artist's novel's text, particularly in the 'mundane' Writer's passages), corresponds with Lucy Lippard's (1984) concept of the artist's 'downward mobility', by which the artist tries to compensate for the fact that she belongs to an educated elite (hence, upper middle class) and attempts 'to identify with the workers outside of the art context' (p. 90). More recently, Dan Fox (2009) has described it as the artist's wish to avoid accusations of pretentiousness, which motivates her efforts to be seen as 'ordinary'. I agree with Fox that such a form of pretension must not be read pejoratively but re-evaluated as a strategy essential in art production (Fox, 2016). One of its manifestations is in the artist's desire to make her work accessible beyond the boundaries of the art world.

That said, I am going to follow Noël Carroll's (1998) argument that the key opposition must not be placed between high art and popular art, but between avant-garde art and mass art. Mass art is characterised, on the one hand, by being produced and distributed by mass technology and, on the other, by being designed in form and content in a way that can be comprehended by untutored audiences (p. 196). These two characteristics will be useful for discussing the fantasy of the novel in *Collapsing in Parts* fundamentally as a fantasy of accessibility that is grounded on: first, the potentiality of the artist's novel to be mass distributed (which I shall refer as Accessibility I) and, second, its narrative contents (Accessibility II).

By no means am I claiming that the artist's novel actually accomplishes its aspirations of increased accessibility. The fantasy of the novel is one thing, and the reality of the artist's novel is quite another thing. The fantasy of the novel is what motivates the artist to start writing and, in the context of this chapter, will be treated as such.

Accessibility I is condensed in Spooner's depiction of her imagined scenario: 'I wanted to play around with the format of the fiction novel, of the paperback Penguin

Book classic that you carry around in your back pocket' (interview, p. 149). This quote perfectly reflects what she expected from *Collapsing in Parts*, namely the potential to reach an audience wider than other kinds of artworks, essentially because the artist's novel would be cheap, portable, and mass distributed.

These features are analogous to another, previous fantasy, that of the artist's book: a category that emerged in the 1960s in reaction to the increasing elitism in the art world (Lippard, 1984, p. 48). I would like to examine these features from the perspective of the artist's book and, more concretely, from the viewpoint of three prominent figures in the field: Clive Phillpot, Seth Siegelaub, and Lucy Lippard. I expect that taking this little detour will shed some light on the fantasy of the novel, because these experts traversed a similar fantasy to eventually discover what was behind that fantasy.

Phillpot explains that the artist's book is regarded as a 'democratic art form' (2013, p. 15) first of all because it is published in high numbers and is affordable to a wide public (1998, p. 33). This is a trait that most artists' novels have retained: *Collapsing in Parts* exemplifies a cheaper price point at '€10 / £12' as indicated on its back cover. Its modest and inexpensive format speaks of the artist's ambition to create a work that can find a way out of the art world and reach a broader audience (Lippard, 1984, p. 48).

The artist's book is also portable. It is 'something that you would ideally be able to buy at a train station for little cost, read in the train, and leave behind on your seat with not regrets' (Phillpot, 2013, p. 4). This holds true also for most artists' novels, which are published, like *Collapsing in Parts*, in paperback editions. The capacity to be held in one's hands is valued positively by Lippard (1984) because it provides a 'more intimate communication than a conventional art object, and a chance for the viewer to take something home' (p. 51).

The third feature shared by both the artist's book and the artist's novel is their capacity to be mass-produced and distributed. *Collapsing in Parts*' co-publisher and distributor, Mousse Publishing, is an independent publishing house with a worldwide

14. Cally Spooner (2013c) *Carol, I Think my Place in History Is Assured* [exhibition view displaying copies of *Collapsing in Parts* (Spooner, 2013a)]. MOT International, Brussels, 7 June–13 July.

distribution network.[23] According to the information provided by its head of publications, *Collapsing in Parts* exists in a print run of 600 copies, from which approximately 150 have been sold and another 100 were given to other artists, clients, and writers for promotional purposes.[24] By existing in a large amount of identical copies, the artist's novel is liable to be experienced by hundreds of people in different locations simultaneously (Phillpot, 1998, p. 34). Many critics, such as Lippard (1984), considered the potential for unlimited reproducibility a strategic remedy against the art world's elitism (p. 48).

When reflecting on the possible reasons that could draw visual artists to create and publish their own novels, Seth Siegelaub (2015) recalled his own experience with artists' books:

> When we were making books in the sixties, we had this crazy idea that somehow the books—yes, let's call them "Conceptual art books" for lack of a better word—would somehow be found at the local central station, and people would pick up a [Lawrence] Weiner or whatever, a [Douglas] Huebler catalogue or something, and take their trip to Brussels reading this thing—happy, happy, happy. And we thought that the possibility of the book enlarged the possible field of a contact, a communication with the general public. Of course, that was totally crazy, but it was an idea—the idea of the public sphere, the idea of art reaching out to a much broader public than people were accustomed to. (pp. 133–134)

It is remarkable how the image of the artist's book available at train stations resonates with Spooner's WHSmith fantasy. It is also interesting to notice that both Phillpot and Siegelaub became aware, *in retrospect*, of the unreality of their own fantasies at the time. As if echoing Freud's (1964b) comparison of the fantasy with a daydream (p. 159), Phillpot (2013) uses the word 'dream' when referring to accessibility, lamenting that the aspirations for a 'democratic art form' were terminated as soon as the artist's book was recognised and legitimated in the art world, collected, and commodified like any other artwork.

> The dreams of many for accessible art were rudely shattered. But some ingredients of this dream had never been very realistic. The dream that

[23] For a detailed account of Mousse Publishing's distribution by geographic areas, see http://www.moussepublishing.com [Accessed 28/01/2016].
[24] Data provided in personal communication on 28 January 2016.

> artists' books could be sold cheaply at supermarket checkout points, for example, disregarded the arcane content of most existing artists' books. (p. 160)[25]

Siegelaub (2015) also calls it 'a dream' (p. 140) that consisted in 'the possibility of getting these books out to a much greater public. That was one of my aims, but it wasn't really possible, and it never quite happened' (p. 141).

Even though the artist's book was potentially accessible in terms of production and distribution, the contents still concerned issues relative to the art world, thus largely incomprehensible and unappealing to the general public (Phillpot, 2013, p. 160; Price, 2015b, p. 115). In this regard, Phillpot (1998) cites critic Lucy Lippard to argue that

> Cheapness and numbers do not necessarily guarantee public access or public interest. … Lucy Lippard [1984, p. 52] … acknowledged "a confusion of the characteristics of the medium (cheap, portable, accessible) with those of the actual contents (all too often wildly self-indulgent or so highly specialized that they appeal only to an elite audience)." (p. 37)

Such confusion was motivated by not having differentiated the two aspects of accessibility discussed in this essay. Although the artist's book could have potentially fulfilled the conditions of Accessibility I, it was still lacking those of Accessibility II. My argument is that the fantasy of accessibility did not disappear with the artist's book assimilation and it has survived, been transformed and updated, in the artist's novel. Accessibility II would then be achieved by means of the narrative content.

Before moving on to discuss Accessibility II, I would like to consider briefly the persistence of the codex, i.e. 'that gathering of a pile of pages bound together, the current form of what we generally call a book such that it can be opened, put on a table, or held in the hands' (Derrida, 2005, p. 9). Even though *Collapsing in Parts* had been already published online, Spooner published it again, at the end of the

[25] When I asked Phillpot about this particular quotation, he retracted his words (Phillpot, interview, pp. 187–188). I was surprised to hear him saying 'I would here pull back from the idea that artist books "should be comprehensible to non-art related audiences"' (p. 188). It seems as if, over time and in contradiction with what he once wrote, he has become comfortable with being part of an 'elite audience' that is appealed by 'highly specialised' contents.

project, in a paperback edition (Spooner, 2012c, para. 3). From every point of view, an online version fulfils the aspirations of the artwork to be cheap, portable, and mass distributed much more accomplishedly than a physical book. Thus, why this insistence on the codex exactly at the time when its obsolescence appears to be irredeemable?

Jacques Derrida (2005) contends that, as the codex becomes replaced by new electronic book forms (websites, eBook, Kindle, etc.), its value will increase proportionally to the possibility of its becoming scarce (p. 17). There is thus a factor of fetishism, corroborated by artist and bookbinder Oscar Tuazon (2011). Tuazon, who is also the author of a novel (2009–12), is sceptical about the book's potential for distribution in comparison to digital technologies. However, he also admits that it retains a sensuous component that its electronic counterpart has not. Thus it would not be too venturous to suggest that part of the artist's novel's fantasy has a fetishist dimension, which is inclined towards the book/codex because it still provides an experience familiar to most people (Phillpot, 1998, p. 37), i.e. it can be possessed and collected. One cannot possess a website. In fact, the International Project Space's website is no longer active and, with it, the *Collapsing in Parts* online version has vanished, whilst those who acquired a copy of the paperback edition can still enjoy it.[26]

Perhaps because the book/codex is 'dead' (Tuazon, 2011, p. 8) is precisely the reason why it is becoming more and more important to visual artists (Thompson, 2015). Freed from its social utility, it is becoming increasingly difficult 'to justify printing a book as an efficient vehicle of communication' (Tuazon, 2011, p. 6), but it might, by contrast, become more relevant as a format to experiment with on artistic grounds.

Accessibility II concerns the use of the narrative in the artist's novel. Spooner (interview) clarifies that she tried to write a piece of narrative fiction as the means to grasp Hannah Arendt's philosophical concepts; as 'a vehicle in service of a philosopher's work that I didn't understand. And I was trying to understand it through

[26] Lynne Tillman suggests that the printed book still sanctions the author's work: 'It's not yet the same thing pubbing first on the internet, maybe because it's easy, or because the book as object still has some fascination' (Home and Tillman, 2004, p. 66). This view is complemented with Stewart Home's conviction that the Internet is suitable to read short, multimedia texts but totally inadequate to engage with long narrative fiction (pp. 66–67).

the vehicle of this promise to write a novel-kind-of-thing' (p. 150). The long, narrative form par excellence appeared thus to her as a promise of intelligibility. With an array of devices such as characters, imagery, and dialogues, the artist sought to address a number of philosophical ideas relevant to her practice in a way that would be accessible to a non-specialised audience.

In order to analyse the accessibility of narrative, it will be useful to briefly return to Noël Carroll's (1998) second characteristic of mass art, which applies to artworks that are

> intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact, for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences. (p. 196)

Accessibility II is thus defined as the possibility to activate a stock of 'cognitive skills that the audience already possesses' (p. 204). From this point of view, the narrative text in the artist's novel is designed in form and content so that it can be comprehended by anyone, first and foremost by a non-art related audience. The promise of the artist's novel's intelligibility is thus founded on the assumption that, in principle, everybody is trained in understanding narratives.

In the same vein, Roland Barthes (1975) defines narrative as a human universal that happens everywhere, in all cultures and moments in history. It belongs to everyone and is ubiquitous in every person's life. It is an everyday experience as old as humanity itself, as if being human entailed having been raised with narratives. It is possible to conclude that, as long as one is in possession of the use of language, that is, as long as one is human, one is capable of relating to narratives.

However, even if we concur with these arguments, we may still enquire: what is it that makes each one of us able to relate to a story? Again, Carroll (1998) can shed some light in this regard: 'With much mass art, especially narrative fictions …, eliciting the appropriate emotional response from the audience is generally a condition of our comprehending and following the story successfully as it unfolds' (p. 249). The key to narrative's accessibility lies thus in one of the traits already discussed in this essay, namely identification. As it was explained, identification is a faculty based on narrative empathy, thus available to any reader. The emotions and

thoughts prompted in the reader by her identification with the narrative text are the means to appreciate the work, at least at a basic level, with no need for a special training or sophistication (Oatley, 1994, p. 56).

But the promise of increased accessibility imagined by the artist to be harboured in the novel as a popular narrative literary genre is one thing, while another thing is what the artist actually does with it. As it happened with Accessibility I, the flip side of Accessibility II is a fantasy rather than an effective reality. *Collapsing in Parts* is an art project devised around the process of writing a novel, whose premise consists in working from the awareness of not being able to fulfil the promise to create a fully competent narrative work that could be comprehensible and appealing to non-specialised audiences. As Spooner (interview) puts it:

> I wanted the narrative to constantly fall apart, which it does in parts, and it's not really a very good narrative. It kind of arrives, then stalls and collapses, before anything particularly clever, or coherent, or narrative-y takes place. It's a terrible novel, actually [laughs]. (p. 149)

The narrative in *Collapsing in Parts* 'constantly falls apart' because all its elements are subordinated to a modular design that prevents it from becoming a 'good narrative'. There is a main narrative vector (the Writer's reality) and three sub-vectors (the stories attempted by the Writer about the Screenwriter, the Golfer, and the Politician) whose interpolations impinge on the narrative structural development. There is never a climax because of its fragmentary design, which always stops at the plot's 'rising action' stage in each sub-vector. The text poses questions adopted from *The Human Condition*, which are then reformulated in a new narrative sub-vector before any answer is given. *Collapsing in Parts* is precariously held together by a set of philosophical concepts that continuously threaten to collapse in pieces due to the Writer's admitted lack of skills to create a compelling narrative (Spooner, 2013a, p. 19).

By inscribing the production of her artist's novel in the framework of an art project, Spooner was anticipating the impossibility to fulfil her own fantasy. *Collapsing in Parts* is neither sold at WHSmith nor provides a narrative likely to be comprehended by non-art related audiences, because it is not a novel – even if the initial intention was to be so – but an artist's novel. When I asked her how she expected *Collapsing in Parts* to be read, whether as a novel or as an artwork, she responded:

> [*Collapsing in Parts* is] a kind of compromise between the two in terms of design, and also content and stuff. Obviously, it is interesting to think of it as an artwork as well. But I think also that, within this stupid idea that you would be able to buy it at WHSmith, was also this weird performance challenge, which is like: 'I want to write a proper book.' So it's still an artwork. (Spooner, interview, p. 154)

As such, it is an artwork that dictates the terms under which it must be read, which are defined by the art project as a whole, including the writing process framed by International Project Space, the Footnotes, the final exhibition, and the movie (it also works vice versa: the movie makes more sense when put in context with the artist's novel and the Footnotes).

Spooner was aware of her fantasy being unfulfillable, yet it did not prevent her from attempting to play it out. In fact, it is the process of attempting rather than the result that constitutes the core of the project. In *Collapsing in Parts*, performance is approached as a promise, and the novel as a fantasy. If a fantasy is a *mise-en-scène* of desire, in Spooner's case the artist's novel is the result of a promise-*en-scène*.

Chapter 5

Mai-Thu Perret's *The Crystal Frontier*

> She has nothing but contempt for our potential customers. She imagines corrupt yet additive-free cigarette smoking pseudo-liberals strolling along the aisles of the market place, desultorily eying our wares, holding them in their hands, maybe trying them on and comparing them to the other designer items they have amassed in their closets back home. I think she is so protective of the bond we've formed, of the freedom we've built for ourselves, that she wants to deny everybody else the possibility of ever coming close to it. Her thinking regarding objects approaches the pre-modern. The only way I can explain it to myself is as a kind of voodoo. She profoundly resents providing others with a vicarious way of easing their discomfort with the alienated life they lead. Among us, she is the destructive character. Needless to say, we would never want to see her go away.
>
> (Perret, 1999–, p. 137)

15. Mai-Thu Perret (1999–) *The Crystal Frontier* [artist's novel].

> Today we live in a museum and institutional culture that is so bent on explaining everything to death with education. … Sometimes the best way is to pretend to be giving an explanation. If you give a piece of narrative it doesn't deliver any explanation at all, it complicates it.
>
> Mai-Thu Perret (interview, p. 159)

Since 1999 Mai-Thu Perret's almost entire artistic production has been based on her artist's novel *The Crystal Frontier* (Perret, 1999–). Whether she creates installations, films, performances, sculptures, clothes, or paintings, they all emanate from its fictional world (Stroun, 2008, p. 49). Throughout the years her creative development and shifting interests have been reflected in *The Crystal Frontier*: feminism, Russian Constructivism, the Bauhaus, and artistic references, from Sonia Delaunay to Jorge Pardo, find their place in Perret's fiction (Walker, 2008, p. 44).

Engaging with the creation of an artist's novel is a long-term strategy that resonates with Benjamin Seror's project, as both artists use the writing process to sustain their artistic production in time. However, whereas Seror limited his project to two years, Perret's plan is much more ambitious, covering nearly everything that she has made since the onset of her artistic career. With a literary background and lacking an artistic education (Perret, interview, p. 156), she found in the creation of a long narrative fiction a continuous work in progress that would provide coherency and meaning to her art practice at large. In Seror's case, the art project was geared towards the production of the narrative text, whereas in Perret's case this process is reversed: the text precedes the formation of the art project. Paraphrasing Sol LeWitt (1999a, p. 12), for Perret 'The fiction was a way of creating a machine to make the art' (Perret, 2008, p. 176).

The Crystal Frontier exists as a collection of textual fragments composed of narrative passages, diary entries, letters, essays, song lyrics, and notes written by some of the characters: Beatrice, Kim, Diotima, and Marina. They are part of a group of young women who escaped their urban lives to found a community in the desert of New Mexico, called New Ponderosa. Their ideological leader is Beatrice Mandell: 'Mandell's theories were a mixture of classic feminist beliefs about the oppression of women, and what could best be described as her psychedelic-pastoral tendencies' (Perret, 1999–, p. 109). *The Crystal Frontier* tells of their efforts to inaugurate a different lifestyle that relies on the respect for natural cycles and resources and a rejection of a patriarchal social organisation and capitalist

economy, with all that this entails in terms of labour and alienation. The narrative is an account of the commune's efforts to be economically sustainable and self-sufficient whilst remaining faithful to their own ethical principles. The commune trades their handcrafted objects in the 'outer world' as a way to raise funds: 'This agrarian lifestyle was also to be supplemented from the profits from their production in the decorative arts, which from the beginning played an essential role in the project' (p. 110).

Much of Perret's heterogeneous oeuvre emanates from the narrative text on the premise of representing the virtual production of the fictional commune (Stroun, 2008, p. 49). In the project's initial stages, it was a rather direct transference between the world of *The Crystal Frontier* and the development of her own artistic practice. For instance, in the artist's novel, the commune's 'recorded timetables of daily activities' (Perret, 1999–, pp. 122–124) find a plastic correlation in the installation *Perpetual Time Clock* (Perret, 2004a). Another example is the sculptural ensemble called *The Family* (Perret, 2007; see Figure 16), which represents a mother and five children 'clad in sci-fi silver outfits' (Keller, 2008, p. 221). These mannequins wear the 'loose-fitting garments … closed with ties rather than buttons' that are described in *The Crystal Frontier* (Perret, 1999–, p. 149). Also, the installation *25 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression* (Perret, 2003; Figure 17)

> is the alleged product of a workshop in unfettered creativity, conducted by the women of the commune. Twenty-five small ceramic objects, all uniformly glazed in black, were displayed on four tables according to four ever so slightly absurd categories: the female principle, the male principle, abstract works, and finally, bottles and vases. (Keller, 2008, p. 209, underlining in the original)

However, *25 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression* marks a change of direction in the project. For the first time, these objects are not described in *The Crystal Frontier*. The installation is no longer a representation of a reality first depicted in the artist's novel. *25 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression* begins a gradual detachment of the visual work from the text.

16. Mai-Thu Perret (2007) *The Family* [installation]. Clothes by Susanne Zangerl and Catherine Zimmermann. Photo: Dominique Uldry.

17. Mai-Thu Perret (2003) *25 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression* [installation]. Galerie Francesca Pia, Bern.

> The relation between the text and the objects was more straightforward. And then, when I got into this self-expression business, there started to be all these symbolic relationships and the narrative started to happen within this set of objects, and it was not described in the text. That started to mark the demise of the text, in a way. (Perret, interview, p. 157)

As the project evolved, the relationship between art object and fiction became more complex. Perret discovered that there is something in the artistic experience that exceeds the text: 'an extra narrative space that happens when you make an exhibition, or when you create objects, and in fact it very often ends up contradicting the story that you wrote' (Perret, interview, p. 155). Although *The Crystal Frontier* world still remains a horizon of reference in Perret's practice, her dependence on the text has diminished significantly in the last years.

Perret does not share Benjamin Seror's and Cally Spooner's idea of publishing, and certainly does not share the latter's fantasy of the novel, as demonstrated in her refusal to collect all *The Crystal Frontier* fragments and publish them in a book.[27] Instead, she displays her artist's novel's text as part of her exhibitions: 'I actually use it a lot as texts in shows, and I think in the end it's more important to me than to do it as a book individually, for now' (Perret, interview, p. 158). Publishing her artist's novel autonomously in the form of a book would mean for her as much as the project's closure. As long as *The Crystal Frontier* remains a useful tool to create art, it will stay open, fragmentary, and unpublished: 'I don't want to close it. It would be quite easy to say it is over, it's a story that makes sense for a certain amount of time, but I find it quite useful for myself and for the rest of the work in general, that's why I leave it open' (p. 158).

It is precisely in this openness, in the gap between the artist's novel and the rest of her practice, where Perret situates the spectator's experience. For her, the work is completed by the spectator, who is called to 'fill in the gaps' (p. 156):

> These are the stories I tell myself in order to make the work, but of course the works also exist in themselves, without me. It's really important that other people could read them differently. I am interested in works that stand in-between their maker and their audience, and to some extent they are never complete without a third person interpreting them, reading into them. (Perret, 2008, p. 180)

[27] Although passages of its text have been included in the monograph *Land of Crystal* (Keller, 2008).

Perret expects her spectators to read her works, but how does this process happen exactly? Is being a viewer congruent with being a reader? In the pages that follow, I will critically examine the relationship between viewing and reading in the context of an artist's novel such as *The Crystal Frontier*.

To elucidate this question, it will be helpful to turn to Jonathan Culler's (2003) account of 'text'. First of all, Culler frames the contemporary understanding of text in 'the structuralist revolution'. 'In the structuralist/semiotic perspective, anything can be a text. … **Text** is here opposed to some sort of generic specification or reference to a particular medium. It is also opposed to the idea of objects that **do not require interpretation**' (para. 8–9, bold in the original). The notion of text is not only applicable to literature but to other disciplines as well, whose objects are now subjected to decipherment. If the artwork is defined as 'the product of a sign system that must be interrogated' (para. 17), the spectator's experience of the artwork becomes comparable to that of reading, insofar as the artwork is now an object that demands interpretation.

One remarkable consequence of this expanded notion of text is the central role attributed to the spectator. Stating that the text 'is not consumed by the reader but solicits collaboration on the part of the reader' (para. 19) amounts to recognising that without the reader (spectator) there is no text (artwork). It also implies that artworks do not possess a univocal meaning that must be discovered, but that their meaning is redefined each time that they are subjected to the gaze of a new viewer. Each spectator casts a new interpretation on the artwork, each of them constituting a new addition in a process of reading and rereading that can never be exhausted.

All this is in accordance with Perret's attributed importance to the spectator as the one who completes the artistic process. In this scheme, the artist would be the writer, her artworks the texts, and the spectator the reader. However, this triangular organisation would be too transparent and unproblematic, for, if an artwork is 'the product of a sign system', it seems inevitable to enquire about the nature of such system. How is a spectator who enters one of Mai-Thu Perret's installations supposed to read it? What would be the equivalent of a lexicon and a syntax that enable one to decipher the images and objects displayed in the gallery space?

Again, Culler (2003) provides the key: his second account of 'text' is consistent with 'discourse', which acts as an intermediary between the subject and reality, enabling her to make sense of her own experiences. Reality is thus mediated by language, which is then revealed as the unescapable medium in which we live. 'Experience is always mediated by signs and the "original" is produced as an effect of signs, of supplements' (para. 33). Language mediates our experience of reality and makes it intelligible, to the point that is not possible to divest reality from language in order to experience reality itself. 'The text is not a series of layers but the interweaving of language with other threads of experience' (para. 36). In other words, there is no such thing as a pure, non-mediated experience. Experience is made possible thanks to the mediation of language.

In the realm of the art world, the notion of text as discourse brings about its own specific consequences. In order for the spectator to situate her experience in front of an artwork, it is necessary that a text provide the con-text in which such experience becomes meaningful. This text constitutes an acquired knowledge that enables the spectator to interpret the artwork (Groys, 2008). Perret is aware of this dynamic when she argues that 'the white cube environment is such that you're instantly put in this detective position of the viewer saying, "I have historical knowledge about this; I know what this is; I think this is there for this reason", or "I know about the artist", or "I know these works"' (Perret, interview, p. 155).

Traditionally, third-party agents have written such text: art critics, art theoreticians, and art curators. They intend to provide the elements that will facilitate the spectator's interpretation by explaining aspects of the artwork that clarify its underlying discourse, be it critical, theoretical, or curatorial. This is an important issue for artist and researcher Jack Segbars (2009),[28] who observes:

> Those who are better able to master and take instrumental command of the underlying theories and ideas than the artists themselves are the art critics, theorists and curators who are particularly well versed in the subject of textualized art. What is exhibited is increasingly communicated in this textual apparatus of concepts, making the interpretation of what is being shown more and more compulsory. (p. 104)

[28] Segbars is also the author of the artist's novel *Inertia* (2012).

Such is the 'new template for experiencing art' (p. 106), one to which the art world has become largely and a-critically accustomed. This mediating scheme has become the default institutional inertia by which the text creates the artwork's con-text, and the con-text is where the contents of the work are to be found.

In his seminal essay *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O'Doherty (1999b)[29] explains how, in the 1960s and 1970s, an expansion of the understanding of art took place, after which the contents of the artwork do not depend so much on its intrinsic qualities as on a set of relations (cultural, social, economic) that are negotiated in the art world. It follows that these, not being immediately evident to the viewer, must be disclosed by other means because 'What it [the gallery space] contains is, without initiation, well-nigh incomprehensible – art is *difficult*' (p. 76, italics in the original). Consequently, 'much of our experience can only be brought home through mediation' (p. 52). Simultaneous to her art-viewing experience, the spectator runs a 'mini-seminar' in her mind (p. 55), which is another way to express Perret's metaphor of the 'detective position'.

There are two considerations to be made. First: that the effect of such mediating con-text can only be exerted when the spectator is aware of entering an art space, hence the crucial mission of art institutions. And hence Perret's (interview, p. 155) and O'Doherty's (1999b) insistence on speaking of 'the white cube', as it still constitutes the art world's 'prime icon'. The effects of lacking an institutional framework can be seen in the typical response to public art, in particular to unmediated monuments in public space, which are more often than not the target of incomprehension and vandalism.[30] As Grant H. Kester (2011) reminds us, without the contextualisation provided by the art institution, the artwork is 'often experienced as alienating and unintelligible' (p. 190).

The second consideration is that the mediating text, insofar as it is the product of specialists other than the artist, is usually written in a critical theoretical jargon only comprehensible to the members of the art world that are accustomed to such use of

[29] Although he is well known as a theorist and editor, O'Doherty is also an artist and author of several novels: *The Strange Case of Mademoiselle P* (1992), *The Deposition of Father McGreevey* (1999a), and *The Crossdresser's Secret* (2014).

[30] 'The history of the field is replete with stories of well-intentioned projects greeted with indifference, scorn, and outright hostility (Gary Rieveschl and Michael Fotheringham's *Concord Heritage Gateway* [1989]; Stephen Antonakos's *Neons for the Tacoma Dome* [1984]; and, most notoriously, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* [1981]).' (Kester, 2011, p. 191)

language. Paradoxically, instead of bridging the gap between the artwork's reality and the spectator's interpretation, such texts usually add more obscurity to the artistic experience (Groys, 2008). As philosopher John Rapko (2015) points out, the curatorial text 'is not meant to be understood; it functions, with great reliability, to police the social distinction between art world insiders and outsiders' (p. 15).

I queried curator and writer Francis McKee about this question, which is becoming increasingly salient in the art world, in part because of the extended sense of exhaustion of this model of mediation. As he puts it:

> If you write catalogue essays, you can see there is a classic way to write about art that is so dull. People will start with a Jacques Rancière quote and then they will talk in that art language, and you'll say: 'My God, this is just like being a zombie. This is totally dead.' … Artists don't want those things written about their work either. They're pinning it down in this desiccated art theoretical language. … Really the last thing they want is another essay that's going to say something predictable in a kind of art language, in International Art English. (McKee, interview, p. 171)

The formation of a highly specialised jargon that achieves exactly the opposite of what it is called upon to accomplish is best reflected in the emergence of a phenomenon that, as McKee rightly points, has been named International Art English (IAE). In a polemic essay, Alix Rule and David Levine (2012) define IAE as a language on which the art world relies. Those who master reading and writing in IAE recognise themselves as part of the community of the art world. IAE is thus not simply a jargon derived from English, but a communicative tool that addresses those who belong to the community (artists, curators, critics, gallerists, magazine editors, writers, collectors, art historians, and so on) and leaves out those who cannot understand it (para. 3). Rule and Levine are able to identify its specific lexicon and syntax.[31] The result is a rhetoric device that says and does very little (para. 16), full of commonplaces and void embellishments, a language that does not ask to be understood, but to be recognised (para. 24), a language that is focused on promotion rather than analytical rigour (para. 30).

[31] 'IAE has a distinctive lexicon: *aporia, radically, space, proposition, biopolitical, tension, transversal, autonomy*. An artist's work inevitably interrogates, questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces—though often it doesn't do these things so much as it serves to, functions to, or seems to (or might seem to) do these things.' (Rule and Levine, 2012, para. 9)

Grant H. Kester (2013) largely concurs with this diagnosis and calls for the revitalisation of what he claims to be a 'discipline in crisis' (para. 7). While he acknowledges that art criticism was once able to provide 'cathartic insights into the contingency of transcendent knowledge' (para. 3), he also considers that, after a period of splendour and absence of reassessment, it has become over time a textual model not suitable to account for new forms of contemporary art practices. Reduced to 'a kind of catechism' (para. 3), it has naturalised a set of conventions by which the art critic more readily engages with a previously existing theory (a-critically 'imported' from some well-established scholar) than with the reality of the artwork, which remains essentially unchecked.

Perret's response to the exhaustion of this model of mediation is to stop delegating the production of the text meant to contextualise her work, providing her own text directly to the spectator. This practice continues a tradition initiated in the 1960s in which some artists, such as Joseph Kosuth, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Smithson, took over the responsibility of setting the vocabulary with which to interpret their work and 'to publicly define the critical terms that informed' it (Alberro, 2003, p. 41).[32] However, Perret is not interested in writing critical essays, but rather in narrative fiction. Again, she is not the first one to be so interested. A salient case is fiction writer Lynne Tillman (2002) who, whenever commissioned to write a text for an artist's catalogue, delivered a short story instead of the expected essay. As Tillman maintains: 'I try to devise analogues to their work; it's a kind of interpretation – narratives are, I believe – but it doesn't replace art criticism, either. It's another way of looking, thinking' (Home and Tillman, 2004, p. 80).

The Crystal Frontier is a textual entry point to Perret's art practice but, unlike art criticism, it is not *about* her work. And, unlike Tillman's writings, it is not a text *around* her work. It is *part of* it. Consequently, excerpts from Perret's artist's novel hang in the exhibition space alongside the rest of her artworks, as any other element in her installations (see Figures 19 and 20). As the artist puts it: 'Very often I also exhibit the text as an art object, screen-printed on paper with a very particular attention to typography and layout, so it literally becomes an artwork among the others' (Perret, 2008, p. 178).

[32] Robert Smithson is an inspiration for Perret in more than one way. Not only as an artist that writes, but also more directly through his text *The Crystal Land* (1996, pp. 7–9), which is a main reference for *The Crystal Frontier* (Perret, interview, p. 160).

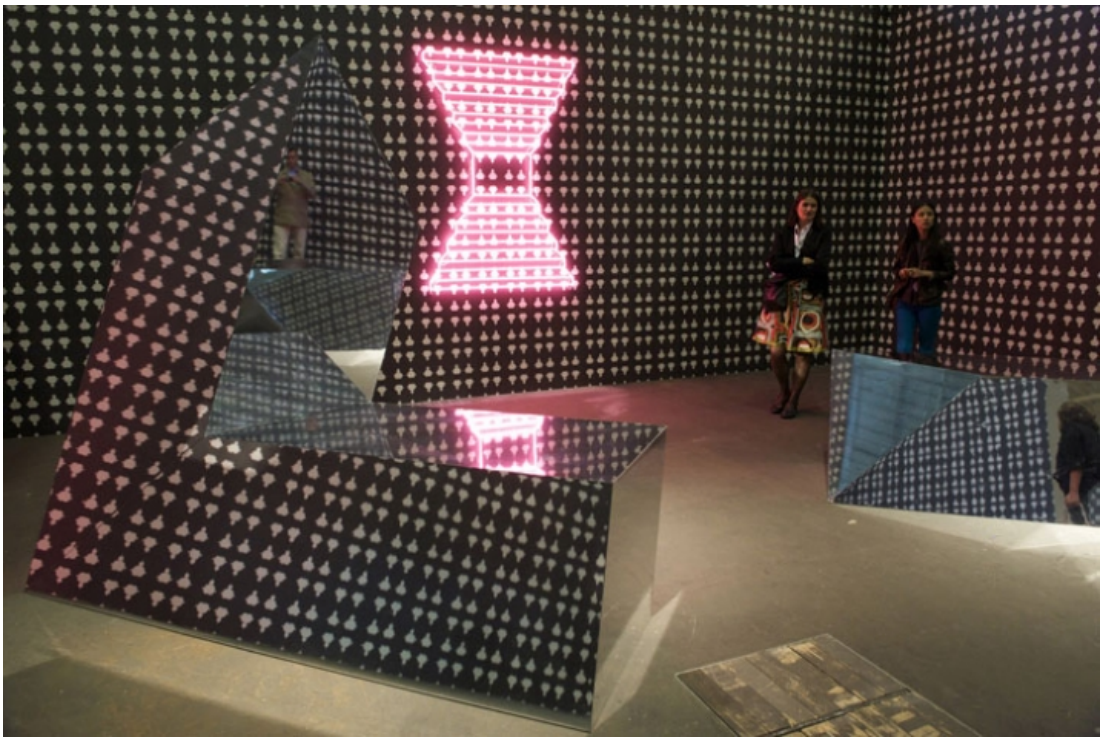
In principle, the artist's novel is all that the spectator would need to read when entering one of her installations. Such a strategy is taken to the extreme of physically replacing the curatorial text where one would expect to find it. Passages extracted from *The Crystal Frontier* literally occupy the space that is usually reserved for the introductory wall text, or even substitutes the captions (Perret, 2008, p. 178). As Perret explains, this gesture

> mimicked the institutional strategy of framing art through wall labels, and inverted it by sending the viewer into a completely fictional space, which was only partially continuous with that of the objects in the show—or that could be described as being the intention. The text does not propose any explanation about the work on view; it is a different part of the same, overall ensemble. (Stroun, 2008, p. 50)

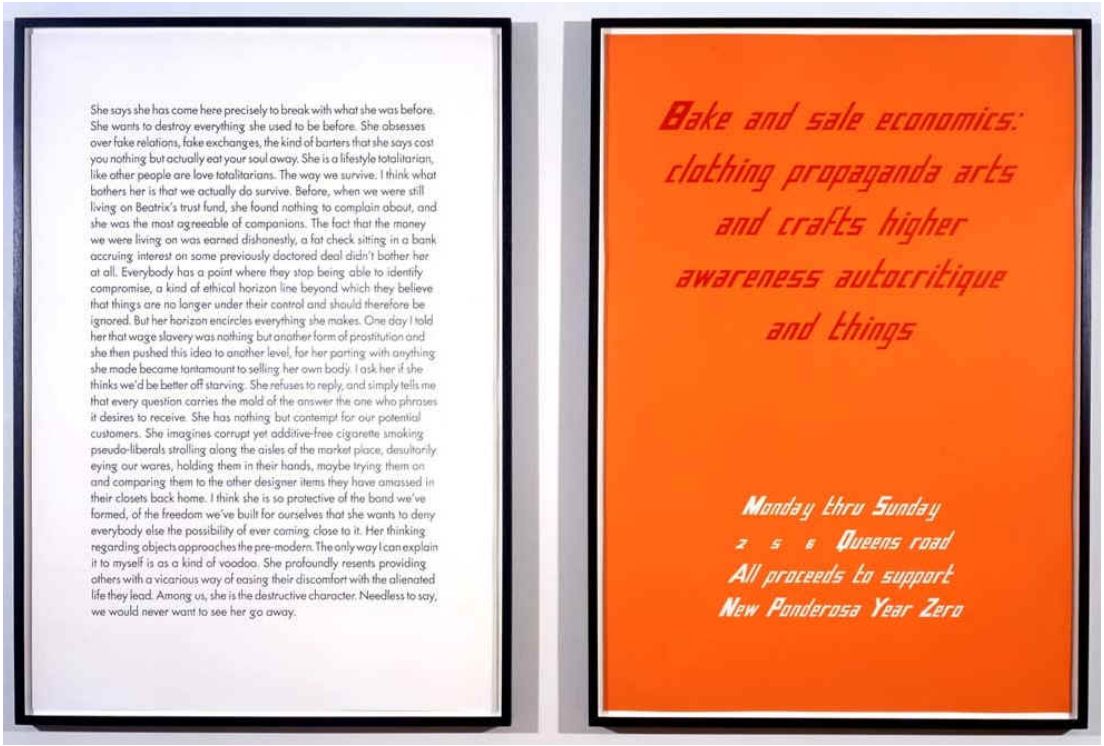
Perret is as opposed to art objects that idealistically claim to be autonomous and refuse any kind of contextualisation as to those that cannot do without a 'completely didactic support' (Perret, interview, p. 159). She has found in fiction a textual mode that, whilst offering the necessary con-text, holds an oblique relationship with the other artworks, being in this way more open to interpretation than a critical theoretical essay that is supposed to discern the meaning of the work. As noted above, Mai-Thu Perret discards publishing *The Crystal Frontier* in a book. She finds the insertion of her narrative excerpts as artworks integrated in her installations a more productive strategy.

> I really like that I can use these fragments as my own didactics, my own wall text. If you read a fictional piece of text and you look at an object, it completely changes the way that you are looking at what's around you. That for me is a more useful tool than having a book that exists on its own. … In the end I spatialise everything, even the text. (Perret, interview, pp. 158–159)

Let us consider an example of how this strategy works in Perret's installation *Statements* (Perret, 2004c), shown in an Art Basel fair booth that displayed the fictional commune's handcrafted objects. In *The Crystal Frontier* the women would sell them in the market to raise funds in order to support their utopian project. Next to this piece there was another one called *Bake and Sale Theory* (Perret, 2004b – see Figure 19). This work is composed of two text panels. The one on the right is a poster announcing the sale, and is extracted directly from the artist's novel (Perret,



18. Mai-Thu Perret (2009) *Aluminium Cities on a Lead Planet II* [installation]. ArtBasel 40, Basel. Photo: Costas Voyatzis.



19. Mai-Thu Perret (2004b) *Bake and Sale Theory* [print edition]. ArtBasel 35, Basel.

20. Mai-Thu Perret (2006) *Sylvania* [installation]. SFMOMA, San Francisco. Clothes by Susanne Zangerl. Photo: Ian Reeves. In the background, on the right side, a text panel similar to Figure 19.

1999–, p. 138). The left panel is also a passage from *The Crystal Frontier* (pp. 136–137), which seems to be an excerpt from Marina's diary. In it, she reflects on another character's disagreement about selling their products in the very market economy that they are trying to overcome.

Let us also reconstruct how a visitor to the art fair must have encountered *Statements*. *Bake and Sale Theory* was the only text able to provide a con-text from which to read the work. Even if the rest of the artist's novel was missing, the two panels (of *Bake and Sale Theory*) were enough to introduce the idea that the installation belonged to an imaginary world, to 'a kind of communal situation where there could be dissent and the members wouldn't agree with what was going on, where everyone would criticise it' (Perret, interview, p. 157). Where in principle there would be only a collection of rather banal handcrafted objects for sale in an art fair, very much like in any other gallery's booth, Perret's text transformed them in the testimony of a utopian project tested against its own reality: intersubjective relationships, conflicts, contradictions, and the constant risk of failure. Life at New Ponderosa became present in the spectator's imagination, pervading her perception of the installation. Where the images do not suffice to give an account of the transformations undergone by a utopian commune and its protagonists, imagination is able to fill in the gaps.

Furthermore, the collection of objects, by being imaginarily transformed in a market sale, became a market in a market, i.e. the actual Art Basel fair where it was presented. In this way, the *Bake and Sale Theory* text not only referred to a fictional reality (the commune's market) but also engaged critically with the position of Perret's work in the international art market. 'The text was making reference to pseudo-liberals smoking addictive-free cigarettes, strolling around the aisles of the market place, and this was very much about people walking around the art fair itself' (Perret, interview, p. 157).

Two immediate consequences arise for the spectator's artistic experience. The first one is that the artist's novel's narrative is expanded beyond the space of the page to imbue all the other works that belong to the same project. 'I'd say that how I feel about my work is like writing in space, basically putting together some kind of narrative in some kind of space' (Perret, interview, p. 159). When entering one of Perret's installations, as for instance *Aluminium Cities on a Lead Planet II* (2009; see Figure 18), the spectator is subsumed in an immersive experience, surrounded

by a space in which each element is connected to the next one by means of a narrative thread. Whereas *The Crystal Frontier* offers the narrative key to unravel these connections, the installation itself cannot be said to display such a narrative. It would be more precise to say that it is pervaded by a narrativity that refers to the artist's novel.

Narrativity is, according to H. Porter Abbott (2014), a 'fuzzy concept', a 'quality' that can be attributed to a given object regardless of it actually being a narrative. 'Where a narrative is a "semiotic object," narrativity consists in "being able to inspire a narrative response". This flexibility and comparative freedom from restrictive categorizing … also gives the term a certain user-friendliness' (pp. 592–593). Perhaps more crucially, narrativity 'includes narrative in genres and media where words are no longer central to narration and where readers become viewers and even active participants' (p. 593). From this perspective, narrativity is a suitable term to describe a property that permeates Perret's works, creating a connective tissue that enables the spectator to read them as parts of a narrative whole, rather than a collection of discrete objects (Perret, 2008, p. 179).

Walking through Perret's spaces and experiencing the narrativity gradually unfolding around one (Perret, interview, p. 155) is what Wolfgang Iser (1978) calls the 'wandering viewpoint'. Although he developed the concept to elucidate the reader's experience of narrative fiction, it can be extrapolated to the spectator's experience in the case we are discussing. Iser argues that it is impossible for the reader to apprehend the whole text at once. The reader traverses the narrative in phases as it progresses, so that hers is 'a moving viewpoint which travels along *inside* that which it has to apprehend' (p. 109, italics in the original). The wandering viewpoint is experienced quite literally in Perret's work. The spectator walks inside her spaces and interprets their different aspects while her point of view sets on such or such other element. Perret's artworks, pervaded by *The Crystal Frontier*'s narrative, demand a particular mode of reading, one that defies the established notion by which the art viewer is able to apprehend the artwork at one glance in a subject-object relationship (p. 109). This is not so much a consequence of the work being an installation, as of it being imbued with narrativity. In other words, the impossibility to apperceive the artist's novel and its connected body of work in a short period of time stimulates the spectator's protracted engagement. Which brings us to the second consequence for the spectator: the deceleration of artistic experience.

The time that is required to read an artist's novel is at odds with what Jörn Schafaff (2014) calls the 'institutional standard time'. It is not simply that art galleries and museums are not the ideal location to read an artist's novel but, more significantly, that the activation in the spectator of faculties such as imagination and identification does not match with the time that one is expected to spend in contact with the artwork. Paul Virilio (2000) has reflected on the effects of instant access and increasing speed on contemporary culture, identifying their repercussions in cultural institutions. The architecture of blockbuster exhibitions held at art biennials and museums is designed in order for the spectator to go through as fast as possible. There is too much to see and too little time (Virilio, 2000, pp. 17–18; Voss, 2011).[33]

A notorious case of instigation to speed is described by Markus Brüderlin (2012):

> The fetish for quotas clearly lead to false measures of success. The most recent 'victim' is the director of the National Gallery in London, who admits that he finds it hard to bear visitors who linger too long. Four minutes and seventeen seconds is the average time permitted by the National Gallery to the visitors of its Leonardo da Vinci exhibition [2011–12]. Here is a public admission of what has long been practice in blockbuster exhibitions: Visitors are pooled in order to channel them through the exhibition as quickly as possible. (p. 57)

The exhibition's curators advised future visitors to learn about Leonardo's work in advance, so that they would not need to stop to read the paintings' descriptive texts while in the show, in order to 'maximise the time they have in front of the pictures rather than reading' (Warren, 2011, para. 17).

Reacting to the accelerated institutional inertia, Schafaff (2014) relates how a generation of artists in the 1990s developed innovative practices aimed at challenging the 'institutional standard time'. Artists such as Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Phillipe Parreno, preoccupied with the question of holding the spectator's attention for a longer time, resorted to implementing literary solutions in their visual work.[34] *The Crystal Frontier* must be situated in such a tradition. Reading an artist's novel can take days or weeks, it asks the spectator not to quickly

[33] dOCUMENTA (13) (2012) proudly announced the impossibility of actually being experienced cumulatively, since it comprised 193 artists and it was spread across 13 locations in Kassel, Kabul, Alexandria, Cairo, and Banff.

[34] Parreno is also the author of the artist's novel *Snow Dancing* (2010). Gonzalez-Foerster's novel is still only a rumour.

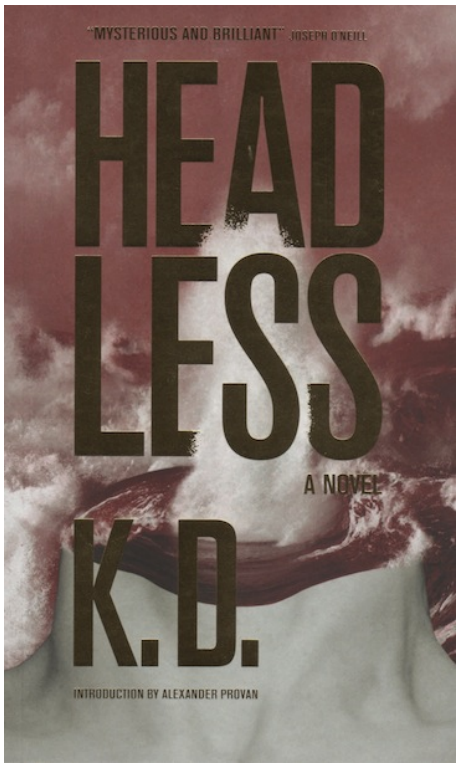
move on to the next work but to dwell on it for some time. Its specific temporality is transferred to the art project to which it belongs, calling on the spectator's protracted engagement to interpret a group of works that are interconnected by virtue of their narrativity.

As Lynne Tillman observes, the use of narrative fiction in the visual arts is not intended to replace art criticism (Home and Tillman, 2004, p. 80). Perfectly knowledgeable of the mechanisms of the art world, Mai-Thu Perret is aware that other sorts of texts will inevitably be written about her work. This is most evident in her monograph *Land of Crystal* (Keller, 2008), where essays, interviews, and excerpts of her artist's novel coexist. *The Crystal Frontier* must not be understood as an anti-theory allegation, but as an art project that incorporates the possibility of being read differently. As it has been explained in this chapter, it carries with it consequences that have a great impact on the way art is experienced, which, in turn, may force art institutions, and the art world at large, to evolve in order to adequately be able to *show* this kind of practice. As of today, however, this is still an incipient reality.

Chapter 6

Goldin+Senneby's *Headless*

> "I just turn their material into a novel."
>
> "A novel called *Headless*, right? The novel is about Headless the company, and it's called *Headless*."
>
> "Yes."
>
> "And this book is a murder mystery?"
>
> "Something like that. It's complicated. Headless, it's also an old secret society, Acéphale, that's …"
>
> "Headless in Greek. Yes, yes."
>
> "I mean, I don't understand most of it myself."
>
> "But you're writing it, John."
>
> "It's not my story, though. I don't have to understand everything."
>
> (Goldin+Senneby, 2015, pp. 62–63)



21. Goldin+Senneby [K.D., pseud.] (2015) *Headless* [artist's novel].

> The dream: Someone, say a business traveler on a layover at JFK, heads to Hudson News to pick up a Stieg Larsson novel, and out of the corner of his eye spots a hardcover emblazoned with the Acéphale logo.
>
> Alexander Provan (2015, p. 13)

The Swedish artist duo Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby, better known as Goldin+Senneby, claim to be engaged with 'notions of withdrawal and invisibility' (Goldin+Senneby, 2015, p. 61). Unlike most visual artists, they refuse to become public personas. They do not attend public events, not even their own exhibition openings. Except close collaborators, no one has seen their faces (I did, because I once had a Skype video-conference with them) and many doubt that they even exist (Kitson, 2011).

Headless[35] originates in the artists' interest in *Acéphale*, a literary and philosophical journal, and a secret society founded by Georges Bataille in the late 1930s (Figure 22). It is said that its members staged rites and even attempted at practising human sacrifices by decapitation in the forest, in the surroundings of Paris, although they were never executed (Demos, 2011, p. 254).

Simultaneously, Goldin+Senneby discovered an offshore company called Headless Ltd. 'They became fixated on the possibility of some connection between Acéphale, which is a French transliteration of the Greek for "headless," and Headless, the company' (Provan, 2015, pp. 12–13). *Headless* (ap) was thus based on the premise of scrutinising the notions of 'withdrawal and invisibility' common to offshore companies, secret societies, and Goldin+Senneby themselves.

A professional writer, John Barlow, author of a set of crime novels, was commissioned to investigate whether there was an actual correlation between Headless Ltd. and *Acéphale* (p. 13). The results of the investigation were used as fodder for a murder mystery novel. 'Barlow was not only charged with ghostwriting, but with managing the shifting relationship between the real world and the fictional realm' (p. 14).

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[35] *Headless* is the title of both the artist's novel and the art project to which it belongs. To avoid confusion, in this chapter *Headless* (an) will be used to refer to the artist's novel, whereas *Headless* (ap) will be used to refer to the rest of the art project. When not specified, *Headless* will refer to both the artist's novel and the art project. When referring to the offshore company, Headless Ltd. will be used. Finally, *Looking for Headless* (Goldin+Senneby, 2007–12) was the working title while the text was in progress, eventually shortened to *Headless* (an).

22. *Acéphale* journal, cover of issue #1. Illustration by André Masson.

‘All the information G+S gather through their investigation is forwarded to writer John Barlow who reworks the material into a docu-fiction also called *Headless*; something in the style of the *Da Vinci Code*’ (Einarsson, 2007–08, p. 109). Conversely, the release of each new chapter written by Barlow provided a reason to launch another event, which, in turn, would become fictionalised: exhibitions, public conversations and presentations, secret meetings, walks in the forest, etc.

Writing the result of the investigation as fiction was justified by the nature of the object investigated, because an offshore company is a fictional entity or, as Angus Cameron (2009; 2014) reminds us, ‘a legal fiction’. As the project evolved, the initial question about Headless Ltd. became both unsolvable and increasingly irrelevant. The search for the truth about the offshore company functioned as a McGuffin: ‘If it is a real offshore company their chances of actually finding it or finding out anything about it are almost zero. I’m not sure whether it matters to the narrative’ (Cameron, 2009, p. 36).

As the directors of the documentary film *Looking for Headless* (2010) ask themselves: ‘If Headless [Ltd.] only exists in paper, like a fiction, how do we keep the cameras rolling? And where do we point them? How do we film it?’ This question about the inadequacy of visual means to represent a fictional entity is crucial, and supports the artists’ decision to employ the artist’s novel as a medium.[36]

In principle, *Headless* (an) is not the product of anyone’s imagination. Many have asked ‘who exactly is *in charge* of this novel’ (Raden, 2015, para. 10, italics in the original) and ‘who is actually the person holding the pen’ (Einarsson, 2007–08, p. 109)? Certainly not the artists. Goldin+Senneby’s role was limited to giving the project its first impulse. ‘They direct the action by arranging the conditions under which the events are to be played out, but can never retain control of the sequence of events, or the reactions that arise’ (p. 111). On the other hand, Barlow’s mission was to fictionalise the materials that the project generated throughout the years. He never outlined the plot nor did anyone else, but was steadily produced by the art project’s evolution, which is why Barlow saw himself as ‘merely a cog in the horrid plot machine’ (Provan, 2015, p. 22). Even more questionable would be to ascribe the authorship to K.D., the fictional writer whose initials stand for Kara Donnelly, the

[36] In the case of Kate Cooper and Richard John Jones, the filmmakers, this question is also an ethical one, as they were commissioned to make a documentary film. The moment they understand that, in order to represent fiction, they must participate in it in some way, the film ends.

client service manager of Sovereign Trust, which is the name of the company that administers Headless Ltd. (p. 15).[37]

Whereas the previous cases studied in this essay (Seror, Spooner, Perret) are cases where the artists are authors of their own texts, Goldin+Senneby 'have never tried writing a novel' (interview, p. 164). The detachment from the text's authorship initially led Goldin+Senneby to consider collaborating with a book packaging company but, when they found Barlow, they 'thought he was the perfect fit for a ghostwriter, combining experience from the book packaging industry with a degree of self-reflection on the position of the pen for hire' (p. 162). Their collaboration did not result in an easy relationship, as we shall see.

Between 2007 and 2015 *Headless* (ap) progressed like a body without a head: each new development in the artist's novel's narrative was defined by that which would happen in the next artistic event. Attendants became characters, their conversations became dialogues, and their actions mingled with those of fictional characters: detectives, spies, hit men, and corrupt policemen.

Headless (an) Part Two, Chapter Four, which narrates a meeting at a Regus rental office titled *An Act of Withdrawal: The Case of Headless Limited* (Goldin+Senneby, 2008a), provides a good example of how the 'horrid plot machine' functioned. One of the participants, Angus Cameron, a professor 'at Leicester University who has written extensively on offshore finance' (Wetzler, 2015, para. 4), recounts the event as follows:

> My own first appearance in Headless – both in person, and later, as a fictional character in a novel – coincided with that of several other people and events. In March 2008 I was invited to attend a meeting to discuss offshore finance in the office of Regus Ltd. in Tower 42 in the heart of the City of London's financial district. … This meeting, which lasted exactly two hours, was subsequently incorporated into the novel. (Cameron, 2014, p. 107)

Prior to the meeting, all participants received an invitation (see Figure 23) and 'a printed copy of the first chapter of the novel – all that had been written at that stage' (Cameron, 2010, para. 2). Thus, *Headless*' (an) first chapter was used as the base

[37] K.D. stands for Kate Dent, Kara Donnelly, or Kelly Duncan, depending on the text and the moment in which the character appears.

for a group discussion that, in turn, was added as a new chapter afterwards. Although Part Two, Chapter Four, appears to be a faithful record of the events and the participants' words and attitudes, a fictional character was added to the narrative. The circumstance of having a secretary in the room, to whom no one seemly paid much attention, was used by Barlow to transform her into Catherine Banks, the intimidating spy made up to introduce some narrative connective tissue throughout *Headless* (an).

Other examples of the overlapping between actual events and their fictionalisation are:

Part Two, Chapter One. The vicissitudes of Barlow in the Bahamas can be traced in his weblog *Going to the Bahamas* (2008). The facts narrated in the blog are afterwards bent to suit the narrative requirements in *Headless* (an). Trivial events became the substance of a threatening experience at the hands of Catherine Banks.

Part Three, Chapter One. Barlow acts as Goldin+Senneby's spokesman in a public conversation with curator Övül Durmusoglu, during the opening of an exhibition at GAMeC, Bergamo. A video recording of the actual conversation, transliterated in the fiction afterwards, is available online (Goldin+Senneby, 2008b).

Part Three, Chapter Four. During the 28th São Paulo Biennial the artists hired an actress to give a public talk posing as K.D. In the artist's novel she is stalked after her performance and, once more, threatened by Catherine Banks. The actual performance took place after the weekly publication, in a local newspaper, of a series of essays attributed to K.D. (2008).

These examples, and many more that abound in *Headless*, exemplify the notion that the artist's novel's contents are located in its creative process as much as in the text printed on its pages. Approaching *Headless* (an) exclusively as a literary work has misled a number of critical reviewers, who describe it as 'a fairly unremarkable mystery novel' (Clarke, 2015, para. 16), 'inelegantly imperfect narrative', and lacking 'the power of good fiction' when compared to Paul Auster's novels (Diehl, 2015). My argument is that, in order to fully grasp *Headless* (an), it is necessary to assume the premise that it is not a mystery novel, but part of an *art project* that appropriated the structure and conventions of a mystery novel.

Claire Bishop (2014) has reflected on the contemporary notion of project in art practice. Emerging in the 1990s, it emphasises 'an open-ended, post-studio,

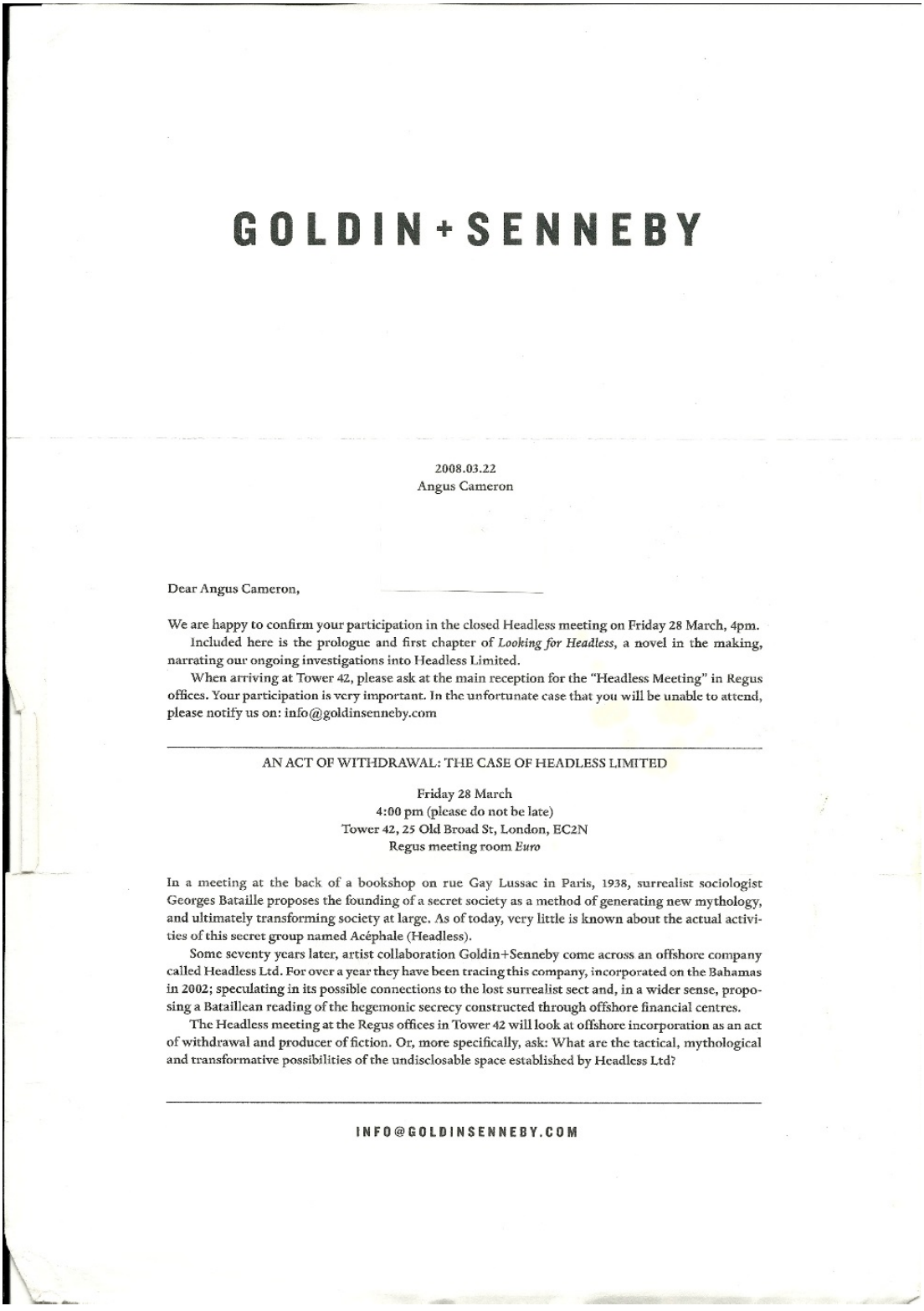
research-based social *process*, extending over time and mutable in form' (p. 240, my italics). A 'project' is thus strongly related with the notion of process, since the work traverses different phases and its outcome remains uncertain until the end. This definition of art project suits *Headless* (ap) perfectly. As Barlow admitted, 'Goldin and Senneby were obsessed with *the process*. They used that term constantly; everything was about maintaining an allegiance to *the process*' (Provan, 2015, p. 30, italics in the original).

The creative process in *Headless* (ap) is defined by two distinctive traits: collaboration and complexity. Goldin+Senneby's idea of collaboration was based on the imitation of 'the use of agents and proxies by offshore firms' (Cameron, 2014, p. 106).

> The decision to outsource the production of virtually every aspect of the Headless project to others was an "act of withdrawal," mimicking the operations of offshore finance in which the true protagonists intentionally recede from view, delegating public responsibility to representatives and endlessly deferring culpability for their actions. (Wetzler, 2015, para. 8)

Over the course of seven years Goldin+Senneby outsourced parts of the project, hiring other people to carry out pieces of research and present it in public (Einarsson, 2007–08, p. 116). Such strategy soon led to 'a proliferating cast of contractors and collaborators whose actions would be at times generated by the novel and at times cannibalized by it' (Provan, 2015, p. 13).

The multiplication of collaborators turned into 'a sprawling complex of interconnections embracing hundreds of individuals and institutions' (Cameron, 2014, p. 106), including, but not limited to, a series of spokesmen (John Barlow, Angus Cameron, Rasmus Fleischer), fictional and actual writers (K.D., John Barlow), publishers (Triple Canopy, Sternberg Press), editors (Alexander Provan), literary agents (Amber Burlinson, Edward Orloff), a Spanish detective agency (Castellana Agency), lawyers (Pia Sarma), gallerists and curators (Kim Einarsson, Övül Durmusoglu, Signore di Pietrantonio), and many other collaborators who, willingly or unwillingly, contributed to the expansion of the project (p. 106).



GOLDIN+SENNEBY

2008.03.22
Angus Cameron

Dear Angus Cameron,

We are happy to confirm your participation in the closed Headless meeting on Friday 28 March, 4pm.
Included here is the prologue and first chapter of *Looking for Headless*, a novel in the making, narrating our ongoing investigations into Headless Limited.
When arriving at Tower 42, please ask at the main reception for the "Headless Meeting" in Regus offices. Your participation is very important. In the unfortunate case that you will be unable to attend, please notify us on: info@goldinsenneby.com

AN ACT OF WITHDRAWAL: THE CASE OF HEADLESS LIMITED

Friday 28 March
4:00 pm (please do not be late)
Tower 42, 25 Old Broad St, London, EC2N
Regus meeting room *Euro*

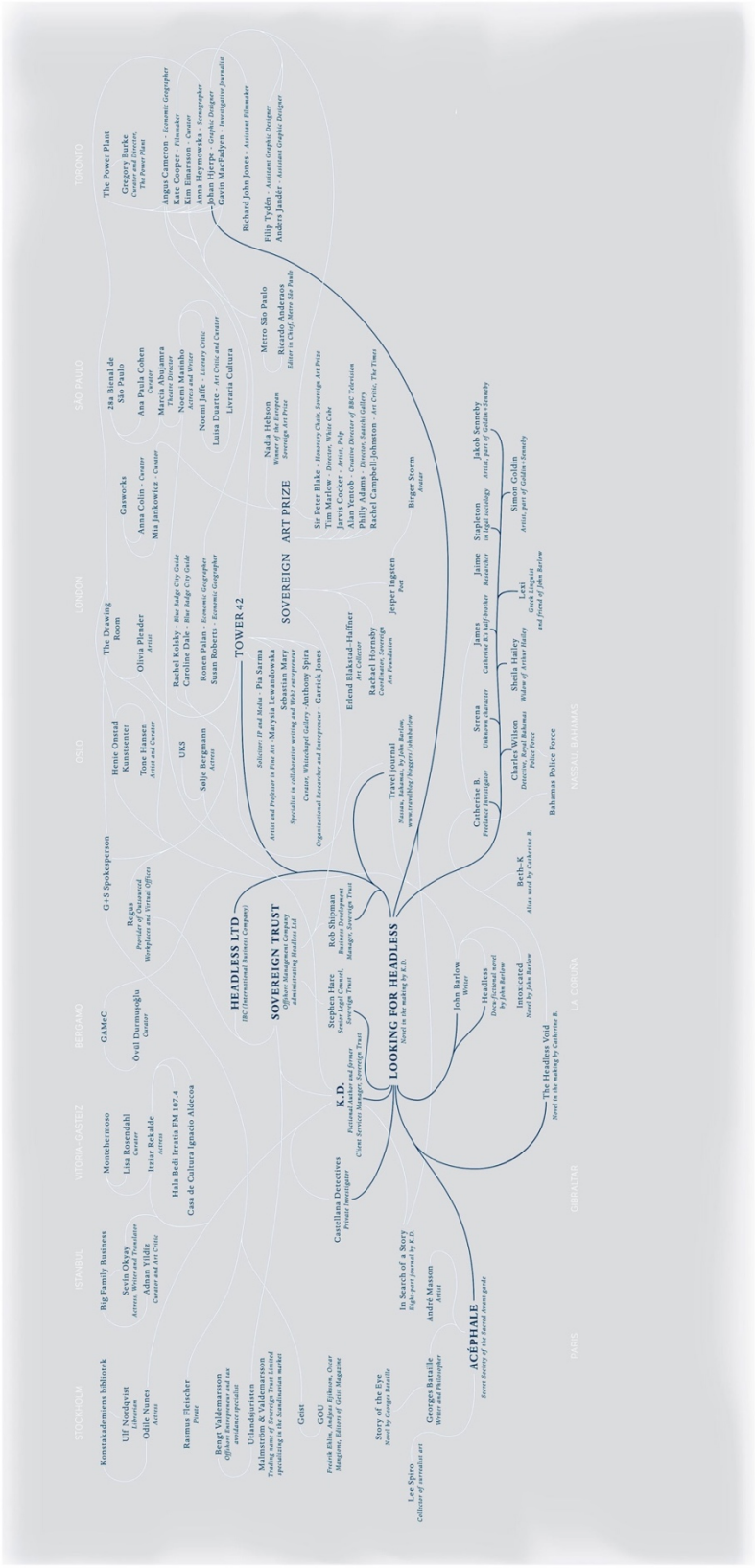
In a meeting at the back of a bookshop on rue Gay Lussac in Paris, 1938, surrealist sociologist Georges Bataille proposes the founding of a secret society as a method of generating new mythology, and ultimately transforming society at large. As of today, very little is known about the actual activities of this secret group named Acéphale (Headless).
Some seventy years later, artist collaboration Goldin+Senneby come across an offshore company called Headless Ltd. For over a year they have been tracing this company, incorporated on the Bahamas in 2002; speculating in its possible connections to the lost surrealist sect and, in a wider sense, proposing a Bataillean reading of the hegemonic secrecy constructed through offshore financial centres.
The Headless meeting at the Regus offices in Tower 42 will look at offshore incorporation as an act of withdrawal and producer of fiction. Or, more specifically, ask: What are the tactical, mythological and transformative possibilities of the undisclosable space established by Headless Ltd?

INFO@GOLDINSENNEBY.COM

23. Goldin+Senneby (2008a) *An Act of Withdrawal: The Case of Headless Limited* [secret meeting]. Broadgate Tower, City of London. Invitation sent to Angus Cameron.

24. Goldin+Senneby (2010a) *The Decapitation of Money* [walk in the Marly Forest with Angus Cameron]. Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, 23 May. Photo: Emilie Villez.

25. Goldin+Senneby (2010b) *The Decapitation of Money* [sound installation]. Kadist Art Foundation, Paris. Photo: Alexandre Guirkinger. The sound recording of the lecture delivered by Angus Cameron in the Marly Forest (see Figure 24) was used as the soundtrack in this sound installation.



26. Goldin+Senneby (2008–09) *Mind Map of Headless*. Included in *Goldin+Senneby: Headless* [exhibition]. The Power Plant, Toronto, 13 December–22 February.

Angus Cameron is a case in point: with no previous knowledge of the project he came to occupy a pre-eminent position by his own initiative. After participating in *An Act of Withdrawal* (Goldin+Senneby, 2008a), he became the most relevant spokesman of the Swedish artist duo, pushing the production of the project through performative lectures such as a guided tour to the Marly Forest (Goldin+Senneby, 2010a; Figure 24), where the Acéphale group met during the late 1930s (Demos, 2011, p. 253).

The accumulation of different inputs by 'hundreds of individuals and institutions' contributed to create a project of a magnitude that defies any attempt at comprehensibleness. 'The proliferating interconnections and multiplying levels of documentary and fiction make it easy to lose one's bearings, which is part of the point' (Demos, 2011, p. 253). It is thus no wonder that the term *complex* has become recurrent when referring to *Headless* (ap): e.g. 'The installation is a small part of a complex and multivalent series of texts and events that constitute Headless' (Marsh, 2011, p. 93). '*Headless* as a whole, therefore, takes the form of a complex series of reflexive dialogues between its real and fictional protagonists, stretched over several years' (Cameron, 2014, p. 108). And, in the same vein: '*Headless* had become so unwieldy that one really did need a gigantic map to comprehend the story' (Provan 2015, p. 21). Indeed, a wall-size map of the project was displayed (Goldin+Senneby, 2008–09) with the purpose of providing a visualisation of its structure (see Figure 26).

In order to discuss the complexity of *Headless* (ap) it will be useful to return to Wolfgang Iser's (1978) notion of wandering viewpoint. Faced with the impossibility of apprehending the project's narrativity at once, the spectator experiences it by progressively unravelling its contents (pp. 108–109). Iser suggests that complexity and protracted engagement are crucially related in postponing the formation of a conclusive meaning (pp. 187–188). The production of narrative meaning is processual: it emerges through the act of reading. It follows that each individual reading experience is unique and produces its own meaning (p. 149). Likewise, Goldin+Senneby are aware of the impossibility of reducing *Headless* (ap) to a single interpretation: 'The *Headless* project is entirely made up of different people's interpretation of what the *Headless* project is. So it is only natural that there should be contradictions' (interview, p. 163).

As noted by Grant H. Kester (2011), mainstream art venues do not favour art that induces 'complex and contradictory' experiences (p. 63). Instead, they give preference to works that express a single idea, so-called 'one-liners' whose meaning is prescribed by the artist and sanctioned by the art critic and/or curator. The result is 'the almost reflexive application of a critical discourse based on authorial singularity and the artwork as a prefabricated and essentially specular event or object' (p. 64).

One would be inclined to think that the emergence of the artist's novel has been welcomed in the art world as the means to overcome an exhausted Conceptual Art legacy, in which the artwork is identified with one idea pre-established by the artist, and in which the viewer's role is limited to understanding, or trying to understand it. However, many see allowing so much room in the spectator's interpretation as a challenging experience. In reference to *Headless*' (ap) complexity, curator Kim Einarsson (2007–08) maintains that 'Maybe it takes integrity, and a bit of elitism, to dare to present something *difficult to comprehend* in a time when a lot of art institutions and galleries appreciate the immediately intelligible and easily digestible' (p. 115, my italics). Complexity can easily cause confusion in audiences that have become largely accustomed to identifying the artistic experience with the quick consumption of artworks whose contents are ideas ready to be effortlessly assimilated.

From this viewpoint, the artist's novel could have been perceived by Goldin+Senneby as a vehicle to convey a complex project such as *Headless* (ap) in an accessible way. Such perception, as was discussed in Cally Spooner's case, is central to the artist's fantasy of the novel. Goldin+Senneby (interview) describe their fantasy as follows: 'The idea for the novel first came to us in front of a bookstand at the Frankfurt International Airport in 2006' (p. 161). Alexander Provan (2015) further elaborates their imagined scenario: 'The novel would eventually be published by a mainstream press, and so the conceptual art project would be insinuated into the world of commercial fiction' (p. 13).[38]

Goldin+Senneby made sure that the terms of their 'dream' were communicated to John Barlow. As the ghostwriter disclosed to Provan, *Headless* (an) 'needed to be a

[38] Although I refer to it as 'Conceptual Art', as a concrete historical art movement, Provan's looser use of 'conceptual art' and 'conceptual artists' will appear in his quotations throughout this chapter.

murder mystery capable of being published and read as such—more Dan Brown than Paul Krugman' (p. 14). The desire to produce a bestseller that would enlarge the field of contact with audiences beyond the art world was never hidden: 'When the novel *Looking for Headless* is completed, it will be presented to a readership outside the art world. Novels have entirely different potential channels of distribution, and hopefully *Looking for Headless* will be a bestseller' (Einarsson, 2007–08, p. 112).

And yet, if that was the artists' ambition, why did they not simply attempt to write a bestseller? Why did it need to be the product of a complex, seven-year-long artistic process? The answer is, obviously, because they did not strive to write a novel, but to create an artist's novel, even though they might have wished otherwise, and this circumstance gave way to paradoxical and contradictory situations. As curator Francis McKee observes (interview), artists 'tend to warp the traditions so much that even if they are hoping for a bigger audience, there's no way' (p. 173).

Goldin+Senneby's initial references were 'Sophie Calle's appearance in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* [Calle and Auster, 2007]*, Reena Spaulings* [Bernadette Corporation, 2004], and *Q* [Blissett, 2003]' (interview, p. 162). These artists' novels are all collaborative projects and, in the case of the last two, the names of the authors have been withdrawn within a collective and anonymous entity: Bernadette Corporation and Luther Blissett. From Sophie Calle and Paul Auster's collaboration, Goldin+Senneby probably found inspiration for the project's dynamic relationship between fact and fiction. However, even considering the influence that such references could have exerted at the time of the project's conception, *Headless*' ultimate goal consisted in being a murder mystery bestseller, as if the artists expected that, by following similar artistic processes, they were going to achieve different results. Whereas the resonance with those artists' novels receded as the project evolved, the model of the literary novel remained central throughout its long process of creation. In the next pages, I will proceed to examine the trajectory of Goldin+Senneby's fantasy through such process, and how it was transformed by the reality that it confronted as well as by the desires of others.

Barlow, faced with the challenge of 'creating a fictional work that incorporated French philosophy and art theory into a conventional, marketable, thriller' (Clarke, 2015, para. 8), delivered a first draft of *Headless* (an) in early 2010, which the artists deemed as 'utterly boring' (Provan, 2015, p. 32). Barlow rewrote the manuscript and

a new draft was ready one year later. Yet, already at that point, 'the performance of the search for Headless came to seem incommensurable with the genre conventions to which Barlow the ghostwriter was obliged to adhere' (pp. 26–27).

Goldin+Senneby decided that resorting to a literary agent would improve their chances to find a commercial publisher. However,

> A handful of literary agents had voiced appreciation for the project's ambition but pessimism about the novel's commercial prospects. *Headless* did seem, on the surface, to have it all. … But the agents believed that the Headless conceptual art project still dwarfed the *Headless* novel. (p. 29)

It is telling that the literary agents immediately detected the difference between the art project and the object that claimed to be a novel. As Barlow also noticed,

> Goldin and Senneby believed (as do many conceptual artists) that commercial forms are more or less standardized; they can be coopted easily enough, at least by those trained to manipulate such forms (i.e. conceptual artists), without too much regard for the desires and habits of their audiences. (p. 30)

The artists obtained similar results when they began to contact editors with the same intention. For example, when they hired

> Amber Burlinson, a London-based editor, to prime *Headless* to be sold to a commercial publisher. "To make this a fully rounded novel, rather than an extended artistic project, I think you need to broaden the story," Burlinson wrote in her initial response. "The constant see-sawing of probability concerning who might ultimately be pulling the strings is both intriguing and, after a while, slightly bothersome." (p. 32)

Barlow rewrote the draft once more. Following Burlinson's advice, he began to ignore the art project's exigencies and aimed to 'simply write a novel' (p. 33). In May 2011 Goldin+Senneby contacted Alexander Provan, editor of Triple Canopy.[39] In

[39] Triple Canopy is a New York-based online magazine and publishing house. In their statement [http://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/about Accessed 17/07/2018] they claim that, by 'working closely with artists, writers, technologists, and designers, Triple Canopy produces projects that demand considered reading and viewing'.

February 2012 Barlow sent the new manuscript to Provan. Characters were more fleshed-out, motivations better defined, and new chapters with entirely fictional passages were introduced in order to integrate the transcriptions of actual events in a coherent whole. Although it showed a greater faithfulness to the 'bread and butter' of the mystery genre, Provan had serious doubts about whether it would be able to fulfil the artists' JFK fantasy (p. 33). He thus consulted another literary agent, Edward Orloff, of McCormick & Williams. Below (Figure 27) I reproduce his letter regarding *Headless*' (an) commercial prospects.

The letter is of particular interest because it reveals a sort of editorial advice different from the cases previously discussed in this essay. Whereas Benjamin Seror's editor, Clare Noonan, was friendly to his project, and Cally Spooner's Copy Editor was rather hostile to hers, both were actively involved in the creative process. But the literary agents consulted by Goldin+Senneby approached the text after it was finished, expressing a disinterested point of view, external to any artistic concerns and to the art world in general. Orloff was asked to assess *Headless* (an) as a novel. Yet he could not help but seeing it as part of an art project in disguise, even though he had not been asked to engage with that aspect of the work.

Why is *Headless* (an) 'not riveting enough'? Because Barlow was assigned an impossible task: to write a murder mystery novel without knowing the plot. In fact, without knowing what would happen in the next chapter, Barlow had to wait for the next exhibition or performance in order to get the material that would make the story progress. As T.J. Demos (2011) noted,

> Goldin+Senneby's exhibition openings and associated readings and screenings serve as fodder for the developing plot, which is captivating less for its literary qualities than for its cannibalistic fictionalization of the realities it both describes and steadily produces. (p. 253)

This dynamic, which is the basis of a fascinating art project, simultaneously hindered the ghostwriter's work. Because, how could Barlow possibly write a mystery in which he did not even know the murderer's identity? In *Headless* (an) situations abound that promise to be significant to the plot, only to quickly wither away and get forgotten. Likewise, characters that seem central turn out to be irrelevant after a few chapters. In spite of Barlow's many literary rewrites, the structure born from the artistic process, which I earlier described as a body without a head, persists in such

McCormick
&Williams
37 West 20th Street
New York, New York 10011
T 212 691-9726

26 February 2012

Alexander Provan
Editor
Triple Canopy
155 Freeman Street
Brooklyn, NY 11222

Re: Goldin + Senneby's *Headless*

Dear Alex,

Thank you for sending along the manuscript for *Headless*. I'm sorry to be so long in coming back to you—this project was a rabbit hole.

Is it possible to cross-pollinate Bataille with two Scandinavian conceptual artists and somehow emerge with a bestselling novel? Why not. And if that novel was propelled by nothing more than the story of its own creation? So much the better. The setup here is brilliant, and I dove into these pages with interest.

I should clarify that I have virtually no experience with the murder-mystery genre (as an agent or as a reader), but this is obviously not your average whodunit. The writing in these pages is vivid and energetic. The shifts in setting between a 1930s Bataillean death ritual and the sun-soaked present-day Bahamas and back again are appealing. And for all its meta-fictional complexity, the book unfolds with complete lucidity.

But the fact is I don't see how to help bring this project into the world—at least not with the trade publishers I usually work with. I could point to certain passages of wooden dialogue or cliché language, but that could all be fixed with editing, and somehow seems beside the point (*Fifty Shades of Grey* is nothing but cliché). My larger worry here is that the central question—who or what is Headless, Inc.?—is just not riveting enough to sustain a 300-page book, thriller or otherwise. Goldin + Senneby are interested in Headless for artistic reasons (exploring the aesthetics of "the offshore"); John Barlow is interested in Headless because he has a job to do; but I wasn't convinced that these rather specific interests would be contagious enough to spread to casual, uninitiated readers. Somehow the whole project felt a bit like a mystery invented for the sake of a mystery—a feedback loop with not quite enough at stake.

Again, I probably wasn't the ideal reader here, and I'm sure others will feel differently. Thank you for giving me a shot at this—and please also thank G+S, Barlow, Kelly Duncan, and whoever else may or may not have had some hand in this genuinely intriguing project.

My best,

Edward

Edward Orloff

27. Literary agent Edward Orloff's letter to Alexander Provan.

inconsistencies. Consequently, if one is to make sense of *Headless* (an), the mechanism of the 'horrid plot machine' must be kept in mind when reading it.

That which makes *Headless* (ap) a great project is the very reason why *Headless* (an) cannot be a 'good' mystery novel. As writer and art critic Travis Diehl (2015) concludes, 'There's no need to dissect *Headless* as literature, nor as the pulp novel it purports to aspire to be' (p. 56). *Headless* (an) does not belong to *The Da Vinci Code* or Stieg Larsson's novels, and therefore will never be found in any bookstore at the JFK Airport. Even though it tries to appropriate their style and aesthetics, its contents are dictated by 'artistic reasons', as Orloff rightly observes. And these remain alienating 'uninitiated readers' who are in search of commercial narrative fiction.

Headless belongs to the art world, where its contents have been articulated and where it finds the context in which to be read. Francis McKee (interview) maintains that artists engaged with narrative fiction are

> writing it within an awareness of the context of visual art right now. So they are writing it within a context of knowing about what's debated, how people are thinking about language, how people are thinking about images today, and they are writing within that context that is somehow obliquely referring themselves back to that context. … They will expect you to know something that will be recognised, that they have drawn in a literary tradition, but that's not the main thing. … Their main point is within the context of visual art. (p. 172)

The art world is a concept coined by Arthur Danto in his seminal article *The Artworld* (1964),[40] in which he argues that deeming something as art requires discerning a quality in it that is not visible, 'an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld' (p. 580). Taking his cue from Danto's article, George Dickie (1974) argues for the 'institutional nature of art' (p. 29). By institution he means an established practice, and it is precisely such a practice that defines the institution (p. 35). Dickie's theory grants great flexibility to the limits of the art world, which are constantly redefined by the very practice of its members: artists, gallerists, museum directors, curators, art critics, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and those who appreciate the artworks, the viewers. The point of Dickie's theory is that, in order to enable such appreciation, a set of aspects must be conferred

[40] Although I refer to it as the 'art world', both Danto and Dickie call it the 'artworld'.

upon any candidate for artwork by 'some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)' (p. 34). Since, as Danto prescribed, those aspects are not visible but granted by consensus, it follows that an artwork will only be regarded as such if it belongs to the art world.

Two immediate consequences can be extracted. One: the artist's novel, having long been obliterated from critical discourse, has not been regarded as an artistic medium by the art world, even though its practice has been a reality traceable since decades, as was explicated in Chapter 1. Therefore, artists' novels have not been considered artworks but literary artefacts. In the absence of any history, theory, or study of the artist's novel that would help them situate their practice in the field of the visual arts, Goldin+Senneby fantasised about massively distributing their 'novel' as a bestseller. Only after they traversed their own fantasy did they realise that *Headless* (an) had belonged to the art world all along.

The second consequence, complementary to the preceding, is the *inadequacy* of the artist's novel outside of the art world. 'All of this makes for a fairly incoherent book, perhaps by design: As it turns out, gallery openings and quasi-academic lectures are not the stuff of airport thrillers' (Wetzler, 2015, para. 6). Even Barlow recognised the misplacement of *Headless*' (an) aspirations to be a bestseller: 'The book is, after all, *about* a conceptual art project being made into a popular novel. … Perhaps *Headless* is commercial fiction for lovers of conceptual art' (Provan, 2015, p. 30, italics in the original).

Eventually, Goldin+Senneby turned to Triple Canopy and Sternberg Press to be their publishers.[41] As noted by Travis Diehl (2015), 'Sternberg Press does not quite cut it as the "commercial fiction" stocking airport bookstores envisioned at the project's outset' (p. 57). Indeed, Sternberg Press is a prestigious art book publisher with distribution in bookstores at international art venues such as contemporary art museums and art centres. It also has experience in publishing artists' novels and other novels written by artists.[42] However, opting for Triple Canopy and Sternberg

[41] Sternberg Press is a Berlin-based publishing house. In their statement [http://www.sternberg-press.com/?pageId=93 Accessed 17/07/2018] they claim to have a 'focus on art criticism, theory, fiction, and artists' books'.

[42] *The Drumhead* (Bibby, 2014c); *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-Four Chapters* (Cytter, 2008); *A–Z: Life Coaching* (Cytter, 2016); *The Crossdresser's Secret* (O'Doherty, 2014); *Sweet Sweat* (Rosen, 2009); *Vladimir's Night* (Rosen, 2014); and *Mime Radio* (Seror, 2015), among others.

Press ensured that *Headless* (an) is essentially going to reach, and be read by, an art related audience, putting an end to the initial fantasy of the novel.

Headless (an) admits that it belongs to the art world in Alexander Provan's introduction (2015), where the editor gives a detailed account of the art project's development. The reader is informed about the fact that the book that she is holding in her hands is the result of a long and complex art project, and is by no means a mystery novel, as its cover design seems to suggest. The introduction functions as a pointer to *Headless*' (an) artistic nature, and the proof that Goldin+Senneby have abandoned any dream of inserting their book into a non-artistic context.

Apart from the distribution network and the introduction, there is a third element that indicates the end of the fantasy: the institutions that hosted the different instances of the book launch are all art venues: Tranzitdisplay (art space, Prague, 2 April 2015); Kadist Art Foundation (Paris, 28 May 2015); Miss Read (art book fair, Berlin, 27 June 2015); SALT Beyoğlu (art gallery, Istanbul, 4 September 2015); and Grand Union (art gallery, Birmingham, 26 February 2016), among others. *Headless* (an) addresses questions of collaborative practice, withdrawal, and complexity employed as artistic strategies, as well as the introduction of fiction and narrative in art practice. But the discussion of these issues is not at all guaranteed to be relevant out of the art world, hence the list of book launch venues that ensured the attendance of an art audience.

In a collaborative project such as *Headless*, other people's desires (the curators, the editors, the publishers) are factors that shape the initial fantasy of the novel. The trajectory of Goldin+Senneby's fantasy shows how some of those desires diverged radically from the artists' expectations. When the distance between the fantasy and its realisation is too large, it is legitimate to speak of failure. Such a distance is a consequence of the artists' ignorance of the implications of the medium that they are employing; a situation unlikely to happen with other, more established artistic media. An artist who works with installation, for example, does so with an awareness, based on existing knowledge, of the possibilities of the medium, even if she delegates parts of the creative process to other professionals.

Nevertheless, in the context of the artist's novel, failure and inadequacy must be considered productive events. As Grant H. Kester (2011) reminds us, 'the greatest potential for transforming and re-energizing artistic practice is often realized precisely at those points where its established identity is most seriously at risk' (p.

7). In *Headless*, the trajectory of the initial fantasy towards its realisation traversed numerous situations that, no matter how contradictory or paradoxical, revealed the structures and interests of different spheres, be it the art world, the world of offshore business, or ‘the morass of the publishing industry’ (Provan, 2015, p. 29).

Conclusion

In Chapter 1 I stated that my research does not primarily engage with what the artist's novel is but with what the artist's novel *does* to the visual arts. So what does it do to the visual arts?

A new bond with the spectator. As seen in *Mime Radio* (Seror, 2015), the artist's novel calls for reading (Briggs, 2011, para. 7), representing the end of irony. It is a medium to establish a different relationship with the audience, based on mutual trust and empathy, and the end of strategies of shock and confrontation. It reintroduces subjectivity into the visual arts, fitting Roland Barthes' (2010) plea: 'The subject is not to be repressed—whatever the risks of subjectivity. … Better the illusions of subjectivity than the impostures of objectivity. Better the Imaginary of the Subject than its censorship' (p. 3). Embracing subjectivity is a means for the artist to address issues of desire, imagination, empathy, and enjoyment as valid artistic experiences.

A new way to read art. As seen in *The Crystal Frontier* (Perret, 1999–), the text is both a mediating device and part of the artist's practice; it is an artwork that also functions as the entrance to a larger body of work. The artist attempts to renew art language under the impression that critical theory is no longer suitable to explain contemporary artistic practices, but rather confronts audiences with an alienating language that mystifies the artistic experience.

> Art is a lightning rod for accusations of pretension, partly because it is dependent on dressing-up games: regardless of the work on display, art comes expertly … framed by professional language that can be alienating to experts and non-specialists alike, a terminology that often seems more interested in casuistry than clarity. (Fox, 2016, p. 109)

The textual turn from the 1960s and 1970s, with the parallel ascendancy of Conceptual Art and art theory, has become over time an exhausted legacy only able to produce a 'dead' and 'desiccated' language (McKee, interview, p. 171) against which the artist's novel proposes a creative alternative. Critical intelligence, as Madison Smartt Bell (2000) states, is necessary but originates nothing (p. 11). Fiction, on the other hand, is performative: with the stimulation of imagination it is possible to propose a different state of things, instead of being stuck in a negative

relationship to it. Once the image of a different reality is created in our mind, desire takes form and undertaking action to pursue it can be instigated.

Not a concept but a story. The artist's novel moves past the long-lasting legacy of Conceptual Art. Sol LeWitt (1999a) wrote that 'In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and *the execution is a perfunctory affair*' (p. 12, my italics). If I have stressed the notion of process throughout this thesis, it is because it is not at all perfunctory but necessary to engage with the reality of the artwork – including the audience's experience. Contrary to the convention that governs the production and reception of most contemporary art, an artwork does not achieve something merely by being the expression of an artist's idea, conveniently validated on theoretical grounds by art critics and curators. As Dan Fox (2016) points out, 'Claims made on behalf of artists that they are "challenging", "undermining" or "interrogating" the status quo (a curiously crypto-military language), or "breaking down boundaries" create false expectations' (pp. 120–121). Obviously, engaging with process entails a deceleration of the artistic experience, since the interpretation of the work is no longer quickly dealt with by resorting to some theoretical concepts. In the artist's novel there is no pre-established meaning, the production of narrative meaning is processual and it naturally tends to create complex and contradictory situations (Goldin+Senneby, interview, p. 163). Each spectator's interpretation is different, since it is based on the use of faculties that, like narrative empathy, are rooted in subjectivity.

A new way to understand art practice. My research exposes the difference between the artist's fantasy and the reality of the work in the world. As seen in *Collapsing in Parts* (Spooner, 2013a), the artist's novel appears to be a medium where notions such as narrative and fiction enable a more accessible artistic experience. 'Appears to be', because the introduction of literary traits in the visual arts does not result in an increased accessibility. Even though it could *potentially* be mass distributed in regular bookshops and its narrative be comprehended by non-specialised audiences, the artist's novel's readership remains largely in the art world. Commenting on Gerry Bibby's artist's novel *The Drumhead* (2014c) curator Vivian Ziherl (interview) points out that

> As much as I would love this book to infiltrate the world of literature and be recognised as one the greatest novels of our time, I don't think it's going to happen [laughs]. I still think that the person who picks up this book is going to be picking it up because they have an interest in Gerry, or they have an interest in If I Can't Dance, or they like the books from Sternberg [Press], which are usually about contemporary art. (p. 178)

This is not to condemn fantasy. Fantasising is an essential stage in any artistic process. Insofar as it gives form and expression to the artist's desires, an image to chase, it is 'an energy, a motor that gets things going' (Barthes, 2010, p. 11). As Benjamin Seror claims, 'A novel is not only a format, it's also an ambition' (interview, p. 138). The artist is entitled to daydream. I agree with Dan Fox (2016) when he notes that there is a 'gap between expectation and actuality as a productive necessity rather than a flaw' (p. 121). In my opinion, the artist's novel is able to renew art language, to provide a different experience of art, pointing towards a new paradigm governed by process over production and subjectivity over concept – but all these achievements take place necessarily within an artistic discourse. Enlarging the field of contact with a larger audience by means of the artist's novel has not happened yet except in the artist's fantasy. The artist is allowed to fantasise, but is also responsible for assessing the degree to which her desires have been attained through her work's trajectory, in order not to confuse desire with reality.

Given the particular context in which the artist's novel appears, ignorance is still a creative factor. The artist proceeds in her creative process by not knowing the characteristics of the medium she is dealing with. The references the artist manages are mainly literary rather than artistic, which frequently leads to paradoxical situations and failure. In the framework of a medium that is in the process of being defined, failure must be considered a productive event. As Dan Fox (2016) claims, 'failure is one mechanism by which the arts move forward' (p. 121). I suggest taking example of Andy Warhol's ethos when, speaking about his *a, A Novel* (1968), said that he wanted to create a 'bad' novel 'because when you do something exactly wrong, you always turn up something' (Warhol and Hackett, 1981, p. 287). A failure can be an illuminating event that helps us visualise the limits of art practice within the institutionalised reality of the art world. By being aware of them, we can undertake a more informed and effective action.

For the time being, the artist's novel is still an inadequate medium: it does not belong to the world of commercial fiction, yet it does not easily fit in the art world

either. But, as Shelley Rice (1985) argued in relation to the previous case of the artist's book, this tension is not a liability but, in fact, that which makes it a 'truly modern medium'. It is thanks to its paradoxical position that it is able to 'successfully explore the paradoxes inherent in our era' (p. 7).

A new way to experience art. As seen in *Headless* (Goldin+Senneby, 2015), the emphasis is on the process, meaning that writing is generally more important than the text. Because an artist is someone who primarily *shows* (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 108), the writing process is exposed and interwoven with the artistic process. The production of the narrative is rendered visible to an audience, which is why an awareness of the creative process is important when reading an artist's novel. For instance, reading *PHILIP* (Chong et al., 2007) without knowing that it was collectively written by eight people in the span of a week would give the impression of an incompetent science fiction novella when, actually, the specific beauty of the text comes from the incoherencies born from the conflicting writing process.

I believe that the edge of contemporary experimental art is being sharpened in the margins of the art world, but I am also aware that protracted engagement, complexity, and contradiction are not notions favoured by mainstream art institutions. Nevertheless, I trust that the growing pressure of new art practices will force the institutions, sooner or later, to evolve and adapt themselves in order to be able to show them to their audiences.

In spite of the call to renew art language, critical theory still provides indispensable insights. I do not think that artists want to get rid of theory, but to open up the range of con-texts from which to experience art. My own thesis is an attempt to balance a theoretical essay (particularly important for a medium about which no study has ever been done) with practice-led research, because there are some aspects of the artist's novel that require the implementation of creative research methods. From this viewpoint, I follow Grant H. Kester (2011) when he identifies field research, participant-observation, and interviews as suitable methods to research dialogical processes integral to the nature of this sort of art projects (p. 10). That is why I commissioned a new artist's novel, to facilitate the conditions under which to engage with field research. I not only observed the dynamics among the participants in the creation of *Tamam Shud* (2018), I also took part of them, from the periphery, so to speak, as I was not the artist-author, but instead occupied the position of the curator-editor.

My thesis does not encompass all possible areas of knowledge about the artist's novel. Other areas of research are still open for a different or complementary approach than mine. For example, one of my research outcomes is that the status of an artefact as artistic (including the artist's novel) is contextual, i.e. it is conferred upon by a social group (the art world) and thus does not depend on its intrinsic qualities. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to search for traits inherent to artist's fiction. A linguistic analysis might reveal a use of language specific to the artist's novel, with a distinctive lexicon and syntax in service to an ambition to develop it as an autonomous practice.

Another potential research proposal could undertake to situate the artist's novel in the literary field. It has always been my intention to define it as a medium in the visual arts, but that does not exclude the possibility of it being able to make a significant contribution in a different discipline. Finding out if that is the case would require research that studies the artist's novel in the light of literary theory and the history of literature. A possible outcome could be the confirmation that the artist's novel is not an innovative addition to narrative fiction, or perhaps the opposite could be revealed to be true: it could point to a regeneration of experimental literature coming from the field of the visual arts.

Appendix:

Interviews[43]

[43] The original interviews have been edited for conciseness. The Appendix presents a selection of passages relevant to this thesis.

Benjamin Seror is a French artist based in Brussels and author of the artist's novel *Mime Radio* (2015). The interview was held between 6 and 22 December 2014.

[David Maroto:] **What are the reasons that motivated the creation of a project, which is not only narrative in nature, but makes such a narrative explicit in the form of a novel?**

[Benjamin Seror:] There are two different dimensions in this answer. First: because the *Mime Radio* project has this shape of being a series of fifteen performances, which have been recorded and then transcribed to make the novel. That makes a format that is special compared to other performances I used to do, which is the fact that when I'd finish a performance I'd do another one that is on the same subject, continuing the story with an audience that is not the same. And that is something very special for me. That's the format of the performances, but that's not the format of the novel. There are different aspects in this question.

There are aspects that are very technical, I could say, a question in terms of production, art production, which is not linked with literature. The question of production is that I was doing a lot of performances and I was doing this thing already, they were improvised; always creating something and then I'd throw away the material. The material was used and I could not remember it. I would not reuse any element of it. And after years of doing that I began to be a bit tired of being at the same time on the road and doing new things all the time. It was a little bit exhausting.

So that led me to an idea, which is to begin to work on a bigger scale in terms of narrative, the narrative of the performances that I was doing. It'd be nice to work not just for one performance but for a few performances and … it's a very important aspect of my work, this idea that I write with an audience, because it's something that I'd always considered very prior to my practice. I'm a writer. So far I haven't published anything, but before working on the novel I was already thinking that I was a writer who needs an audience to write. I am a writer who needs an audience to be able to begin to write. I'm not a writer who writes alone, all manual. That's a very important aspect. I was always considering this thing of being a writer who doesn't write a text.

So when I began to read this I realised that there was a very good quality, there was a specificity of this text that came from being said in public. And then … I began to think about the format that could be. At the time I also wrote pieces that I called 'opera'. So there was something logical in going from the opera to the novel, as an ideal format that is extended into performance. It is also something very classical, there's an ambition in the novel that I like very much. You are also facing a format that has a very strong history. A novel is not only a format, it's also an ambition. As I was calling other pieces that I was making 'opera', I thought that I was already very close to that ambition.

But I also really like this idea of doing a series of performances, and it has something to do with transcribing it and to make literature, that's what it really is. I didn't know how it was going to work when I began to do it, but I was interested in the idea that I would tell a story to an audience, which is a novel, so it has a unity in time, in the characters, in time, there's a continuation in the story. But I knew when I was beginning that I was going to be travelling, that the audience would always be different. I'd be a writer that would meet a different audience. It was very interesting to me to consider how to add this continuity without losing the audience, and I thought in terms of formats that were interesting, because it had to look like in a nineteenth-century newspaper, where the novel was published in a sequence. So that began to structure it a little bit. I began thinking that each chapter needs to be a very strong story with a cliff-hanger at the end … the novel is pretty much like a television show, actually.

At that time I was thinking a lot about production, I still think a lot about production. There was a problem in my practice, which was that sometimes I'd screw up the performances. I'd make a performance and it wasn't good. …The very specific part I began to be annoyed with was that sometimes you don't deal with all the conditions. So what happens when you do a performance that is not good? It just basically means that you throw away some material but nothing ever really happens. The interesting thing in this process of writing a novel was that I was able in a way to use the material. It means that the audience is not necessarily the object, the audience that is here tonight is part of the audience, but because I have this recording and I know that I'll go into the text of a novel, I could focus on talking to you as an audience but I would also focus on talking to the reader. There will be someone else in the future.

And here there's a dimension that I found very stimulating, that you are talking to someone, in the sense that the audience is here and at the same time there's a reader in the future. And there is a question on the artistic side of the product, which for me is always linked to questions of production. Because I was recording the performance, it means that I was also protecting the performance. So something could happen badly, something could go wrong during the performance, but that was not a problem for me anymore because I was recording it, I was working for the future, not only for the present.

Your project reminds me of Roland Barthes' *The Preparation of the Novel* (2010). He also made a series of lectures for two years about his idea for his future novel. But for you this is also a double move because normally you are bringing the audience to the live moment and now you are also working for an audience in the future.

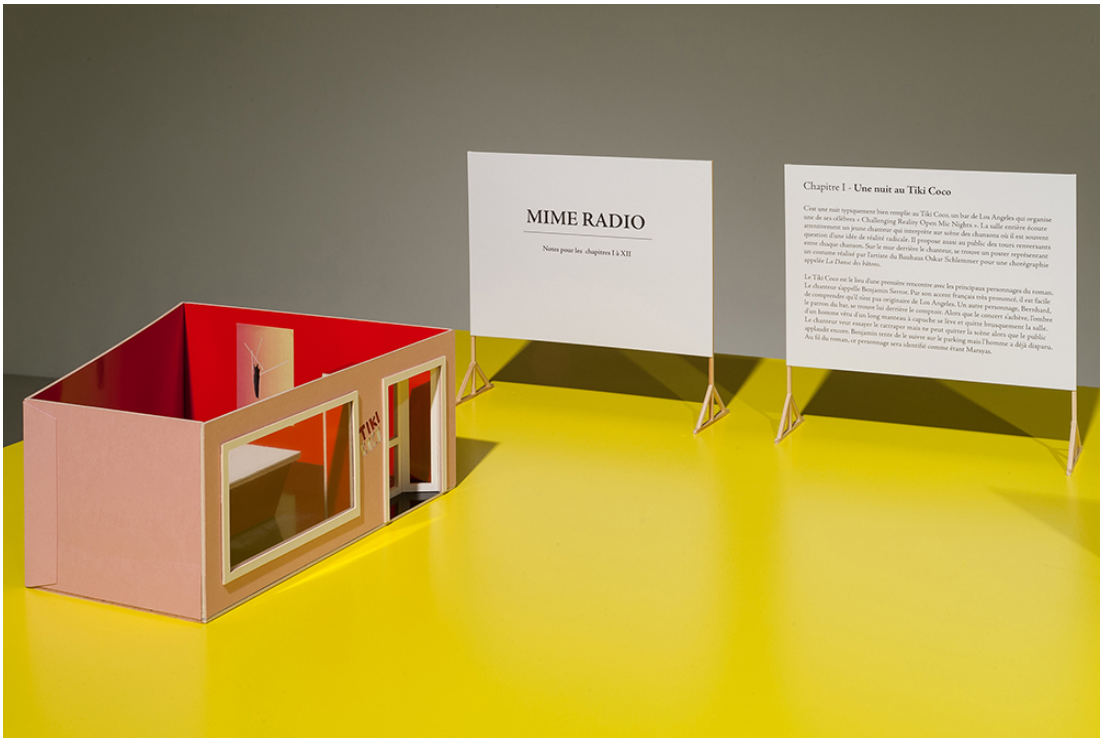
It's an inversed way of writing. The writing is done in public, and I always find it funny because at the end I didn't write this novel. Because I have a great friend, it's not me who corrects it but Clare Noonan, she is the one who does the transcript. That gives her a very special status.

I'm very attached to ideas of oral traditions and oral transmission. The first step is oral transmission. … I like that the novel is first something orally transmitted and then, after that, it's transcribed and you can read it. But first it's like this very pre-modern … the novel is only the technique that arrived then.

Before you started the *Mime Radio* project, were you aware of other artists' novels? Did you read any before producing yours?

A little. I liked Keren Cytter very much, but I never read her, actually. I think I'm more interested, in general, in artists' narratives. I think it's something from my generation that came years after artists like Pierre Huyghe. At the beginning of every work there is a narrative, and if I think of Pierre Huyghe in general, or Philippe Parreno, [it] is because there's something very strong in their work. There's always a sort of fictional part in the piece, always a fiction. ... Their movies, their pieces are always about something that is about to tell a story, to create a situation, to create a narrative. And I thought that it would be interesting to use all these tools to tell new stories and create new forms to tell stories. So that's how *Mime Radio* finds its source there.

28. Benjamin Seror (2013b) *Mime Radio, Chapter VII* [performance]. LACE, Los Angeles. Presented as part of *LA Existancial*, 16 January–3 March.



29. Benjamin Seror (2012–15) *Notes for Mime Radio* [installation]. Le Quartier CAC, Quimper. Photo: Emile Ouroumov.

My hope is that people will read it because it's not an artwork, it's not an object, it's not a position. It's a story that you have to read to get. So it's not the object itself, it has to read like a novel.

An artist's novel is a hybrid and also ambiguous object: should your novel be read as a regular narrative fiction work or as an artwork? Do you think that both modalities of reading can be simultaneous (and how could such a thing be possible), or does one prevail over the other?

It's something that is a bit complex to answer, but I have desires. … Sometimes I have a bit of a problem calling it a 'novel', because for me it's not the desire of a novel, it's the desire of a narrative, a construction. I have the desire to tell a twelve-part story, and to structure it, and the model of the novel is a way to structure it. But the thing at the end won't be an object that is to look at to think of the image of a novel. It's a story that you need to read; it's a project that you need to read in order to get in it. And that's not always the case. For me it was important to think of the strategy: what the book will look like, what the text will be, and also how I'd structure the text. It was very important to think how it'd be possible that the audience begins to read it and they're caught to read it until the end.

You are now engaged with the publication of *Mime Radio* as a book. Could you tell me about the transition from being the result of an art project (and, as such, subjected only to the internal logic of the project it belongs to) to a piece of narrative fiction suitable for publication and distribution (and the role of the publisher and other agents in such transition)?

I have a very good relationship with my publishers, and it's a project that comes from a proposition by these publishers. … So they knew from the beginning what the process would be. They were totally supportive with how the process would happen and we worked it out. We said, 'It's nearly the beginning, so what do we need when we record the performances?' We wrote a protocol and now we are editing the text together. So there was no tension. It was a question of how to make the work more efficient, how to be more precise.

So there was a phase when I began to wonder 'Who am I going to edit the text with?' One option was a person who is a novel writer, someone who is used to edit texts of literature as for a normal publishing house. The other option was 'No, let's be as close as possible to the recording'. I was for the first option and, after having

completed half of the book I realised that the text is very, very special and I should keep it like this.

So there's no editing at all?

No, there's [been] editing. It's crazily edited. But in the classic literary standard you would rewrite everything. I'm not saying that it's a bad thing. I wouldn't mind if there wasn't a choice. But we wouldn't rewrite it because it's very special, with a lot of mistakes …

But, in the editing process you keep the mistakes and the repetitions, so what part of the text do you actually edit?

It would be extremely difficult to read if it was not cleaned out, so basically the editing consists in cleaning it in a way that it becomes a text. When you talk there is a variety of markers that are not present, that become something else in the transcription, and that makes sometimes reading something very difficult, because you read out of the impros. A lot of my text is that, it's really the key to what we keep, which is very complex because it means to keep the energy of the text, and the variety of the text but without losing the essence and without giving the feeling that it was edited.

I wonder if artists who work with narratives try to go beyond the legacy of Conceptual Art. So that an artwork, like you said, is not something to look at, or to think about, you actually have to read it. It's not just an idea, it's an experience that will bring the idea but you have to experience it first.

An experience is always something sincere. And for me it's a very important tool, because I like very much to use a lot of lies and my work is in a way not sincere at all [laughs]. It can create a lot of tricks, like disturbing the perception of the audience about what is improvised, what is natural … I use the shyness; I use a lot of things like this. And I like that very much, with all this insincerity together, with all these tricks, you cannot avoid the fact that the only thing that is sincere in this situation is the experience of the audience: if they are bored, they are just bored. And if they are excited, they are excited. And, in my case, it couldn't work with being bored. It's something that it's unfortunate but there are artworks that are extremely boring. But, in my case, it works with the fact that I need to have the audience caught to move on, I need to have the brain … I need people to be connecting things. … They have to be taken in it. That's for me a very good example of this sincerity, to have these

feet that go like this [tapping moves with his hands]; you need to be very good and catchy. … The most important thing is that the novel should be like this. It's not an object.

Transcribing your recordings is a critical moment because it also means editing them and removing all that is considered unnecessary or difficult for the reader's experience. Yet, you want to preserve the characteristic of your language when the narrative is uttered, improvised in real time. Where do you establish the limits between what must be removed and what must be preserved? Do you have some set of rules for this?

It's been a long process to figure this out. And there are things that have changed during the process. I edited the thing in different moments: one, in February last year [2013] and, the other, since September till now. The part I did in February was interesting, because I still had some performances to do, like the one you saw in Amsterdam (Seror, 2014a; Figure 6). These were the last chapters and I also rerecorded some previous chapters, which weren't that good. And, beginning doing it helped me a lot to understand what was going to be the body of the text. It also helped me to change a lot the way to prepare and do the performances after that. So it's interesting to think that the editing process was also part of how to make the performance itself, to organise the material of the performance.

And then I came up with this idea, with this first sentence … It's like a mythical moment, 'I came up with the first sentence of the novel'. Which is: 'Check, check, check. One two, one two. I hope you hear me well.' It's not really focused on writing anything. It's very clear that the first thing that is done is to check that the microphone works, to check that there's sync with the audience. That's the pact with the audience that is listening: the voice of the character that you're listening [to] is the voice of someone who is telling the story in a bar with a microphone.

So, based on that, it began to be easier to understand what should be in the book or not. One of the rules is that these two moments, the story and me telling the story, are very different. It's very difficult for a reader to get out of the story. When you read the text and that day I was telling jokes that were about the first guy in the audience: 'Why are you picking your nose?' or something like this, I'd be consciously getting you out of the story. And sometimes it'd be very funny, a moment that I'd like very much in terms of performance, but it'd be not interesting or not necessary in the story. It'd rather be counterproductive. If you remember, last week we were talking

about the idea that it's a text and it should be a novel. And the novel is not an object; the idea is writing literature.

For me it's very important that at the end it's not necessary [that] the performance leads to the text. The text becomes itself something with a density. So the rule has been more or less … to edit out the contemporary moment, the moment that was then and there, which makes the performance. … There was a moment in which it was very difficult to read the text, because it was so close to the performances, and I was remembering the performances and thinking, 'Ah, this part was very nice', and 'I like this part'. This had very little link to the story itself, and finally the text was very close to the performances, but the materiality of the text began to be very distant to the performance itself. I found it interesting because the editing was very light. It was much more about cutting than rewriting. There's very little rewriting in the material. It was mainly about just editing out. But at the end it takes a very different atmosphere.

If I understand correctly, there are two moments in the project: somewhere in the middle of the project you begin to make the transcriptions and to read them, and this will affect the future performances. In a way, you perform to write, but this writing will also influence the future performances. This makes two different moments because in the first performances you didn't have the support of the existing text.

Yeah, I find [it] interesting that the writing will affect the performance. In a way I began to 'live' edit the text to be closer to the type of material I'd like to have for the reader. After that I read a few performances … maybe the first two were a bit difficult to use, because this way of writing or performing is not only projected to the audience that is in front of you, but it's also projected to a longer type of continuity for the story.

I didn't do the transcripts myself. Clare Noonan, a good friend of mine, worked on this. She was very fast; she was doing this nearly in real time: two or three days after the performance I'd send it to her and the week after I'd have it. So yes, I began to read it while we were doing it, but I only began to edit it after we had five texts, I think, maybe six. And then I realised that something was not working well enough. I did two performances more …

I already had the transcript and I could see what was working or not. I find it interesting because for me the question of addressing the performance is very important. … This created two kinds of address, in a way: the audience that will be reading the novel and the audience listening to the performances.

There was a point when you thought that some of them needed to be redone. It's not a straightforward process, but it's going back and forth all the time. How many of these performances did you repeat?

I redid two of them, and then there were little pieces of performances that were not clear, or the continuity was not good. Also, in other performances I sneaked in some other material. For example, during the second one in Kunstverein (Seror, 2014b) I did some corrections for Chapter IV.

Something specific in my performances is the question of trust in the audience. It's a very positive idea of the role of the audience. If there's any difference with historical performance (if you think of Fluxus, or things from the 60s) I think that what I do and, in general, people from my generation who use performance, is based on the idea that we need the audience to do something, which is very different from Fluxus, where they'd exhaust the audience. They'd do everything to make sure that the audience would run away, or got bored. Three years ago, during a performance that I was doing in the opening of the Lyon Biennial, there was an old Fluxus guy. And he told a friend of mine: 'But this guy … I really don't like him. He's so nice to the audience [laughs]. That's so boring, it needs some friction.' And it's funny because I always think that I convene the audience, so I have to give them some material. Without an audience I could not do it because I need the audience to talk.

***Mime Radio* is to me reminiscent of Andy Warhol's *a, A Novel* (1968). He handed a sound recorder to one of his Factory actors, Ondine, and for twenty-four hours he recorded his conversations. Afterwards Warhol sent the tapes to be transcribed and he published the result quite literally. There is a clear irony in his use of the word 'novel' in a work that is utterly unreadable and that reads like a critique of the cultural status of the book. How do you relate your novel to an existing literary tradition?**

A source for the novel is a text by Walter Benjamin that he wrote for children. It's very sad, because it doesn't exist in the original form anymore. They were radio pieces for the radio [station] he worked for in the late 1920s in Germany, and the

tapes are lost. It's called *Lights for Children*.[44] … There's a little note in the book that explains that while he was doing this he had the budget to have someone type his text. … I read this years before *Mime Radio* and it's something that I kept in mind. I thought: 'That's what I do, actually. I'm a writer that talks to people because I'm stressed by the fact of writing.' So that was the source that led me to think that I could also write, that I could also use this technique to write something.

Of course, there's also David Antin, he's very important. When I discovered him I had been doing performances for a while. Sometimes there's this kind of work that you discover and you cannot work for a while because it seems that everything that you are doing is in it, and that's very annoying [laughs]. … But by knowing the work better you understand the difference.

Antin is a poet that begun to work in the late 50s, early 60s. It's interesting because to make his living he wrote a lot about art. … And one day he decided to stop writing, to tell the thing directly, so he would come and talk in public and record what he was doing and transcribe it. So the source is very clear. The talks are like one or two hours long and he talked about … he improvised it, but he would talk mainly about how he came here, and what is talking about, what it means to talk. It was very self-referential.

For me, the whole process of the work means that you need to feed your imagination, you need fictions to be able to invent things. Speech is the interface of the brain. We need the speech to activate the brain and writing fiction helps to invent things. We need our dreams to able to invent new things, so fictions are important to train our brain – or rather, to force the brain to make new connections. Fiction has had this function since humanity was capable of speech.

You call your small models *Notes for Mime Radio* (Seror, 2012–15; see Figures 8, 9, and 29). My interpretation is that you use them as a kind of tool to anchor your imagination. On the one hand, you refer to the actual space where the audience is and, on the other, these models allow you not to lose track of the fictional space.

The idea that there's a physical space for the fiction is interesting, and that's mainly how I thought that it's a very long table, it's a landscape. The table is yellow, it's a very desert landscape, like you can find here in Los Angeles, because the novel is

[44] The actual title is *Aufklärung für Kinder* (*Enlightenment for Children*).

set in Los Angeles. That's why it was interesting to come here to finish the edits, to make sure there was no mistake about that.

I like the idea that the fiction is somewhere and we go to the fiction. We could say: 'Let's go to the fiction', like we go to the movies. Fiction is useful when it interacts with reality. I worked on the model with the idea that I'd like to use as few words as possible to prepare the performances. I write a lot of notes before, but never about the performance itself. I take notes about materials and so, but when I do a performance I never structure it. I don't know with what I'll begin or what will be the end. So I usually know that I'll have that material but I don't know in which order it will arrive. The model was because this project would not be one performance, but as many as would be needed for the book; at the end twelve chapters. I thought that I'd need to have a structure for the story. The model was a way to have an overview of the structure of the story, and to be able to think about it without using words to describe it. I did it as a landscape, and you can look at the novel and the story in one view. I never saw that before, you see a story, a landscape of the story.

You were adding, right? First of all, you made one table and, as the story progressed, more tables were added. So at the end there are twelve tables, one table per chapter?

It's one metre per chapter – it's not that precise – and there are twelve parts on the table. I began to do it when the story was not really clear. … I always do some models and these are 1:1 scale. I think that you've seen the 'thought transmitters'; it was these little boxes with two antennae. This is a 1:1 scale object, which is a model of something that doesn't exist. When I use it in the performance it's funny because it represents something that doesn't exist. I like these transfers of reality. I think you also saw the model of the house that goes unfolded. It's a model in the novel too. So it's 1:1 scale in reality and in the novel. When I was making the model I began to be interested by the idea that some objects could go out of the novel. They could be in the book and be used in 1:1 scale. I just like the idea of [a] different status of reality of things. This object is 80% real; this other one is 70% real. With the table it's how I organise this kind of transfer. On the table everything is fictional and sometimes I take it off and introduce it in the story, so it goes from 50% real to 80%.

Cally Spooner is an English artist based in London and author of the artist's novel *Collapsing in Parts* (2013a). The interview was held on 1 February 2015.

[David Maroto:] **Before you started the *Collapsing in Parts* project, were you aware of other artists' novels? Did you read any before producing yours?**

[Cally Spooner:] An artist's novel … I think I tried to read Bernadette Corporation's novel,[45] but artists' novels … I don't know. Not really. I'd read things like … no, I hadn't read any actually. I knew they exist[ed]. I knew that Keren Cytter had written loads of novels … But mostly I read, like, Frances Stark or something like that, but she wasn't writing novels, she was just writing. I think that I knew I wanted to write a novel and that was coming from … No, I haven't read any other artist's novel.

What are the reasons that motivated the creation of a project, which is not only narrative in nature, but makes such a narrative explicit in the form of a novel?

First of all, I wanted to make the project because I wanted to see whether or not I could write a novel. It was a bit of a performance challenge, because I just had this desire to sit down and write a lot, but I knew that I wouldn't do it unless I made myself, or unless there was some structure in place that would force me to write for a month, or some kind of public pressure to live up to something. So it first came out of just wanting to see if I could write. I have always read fiction. I read a lot and I had always wanted to write. Everybody is like: 'Oh, I want to write a novel.' You know, it's like the thing everybody wants to do, isn't it? And everyone is supposed to have a novel in them. I don't know, I just had this weird desire to write. Then I just wanted to play with it more conceptually. I wanted to play around with the format of the fiction novel, of the paperback Penguin Book classic that you carry around in your back pocket. I wanted my novel to have no … I wanted the narrative to constantly fall apart, which it does in parts, and it's not really a very good narrative. It kind of arrives, then stalls and collapses, before anything particularly clever, or coherent, or narrative-y takes place. It's a terrible novel, actually [laughs].

One of the elements of *Collapsing in Parts* is the narrator's struggle to convey concepts into a narrative. Do you feel that narrative, and more concretely the

[45] *Reena Spaulings* (Bernadette Corporation, 2004).

novel, is an 'unnatural' medium for the visual artist, who is perhaps more used to deal with ideas than with stories (as reflected in your Screenwriter's *structure vs. detail* struggle)?

It is definitely about the concept of trying to do something, or trying to bring something into circulation. The places where it falls short are the moments where the expectations of a great novel, like detail or elegance, or like the ability to write precisely, it just kind of short-circuits, and it's like: 'Oh no, I can't do that, it doesn't work.' I was interested in this device of great writing being almost like great design, you plan it out and every detail is very exact, and this kind of masterful construction comes together. I was more interested in the challenge of actually writing the novel and wanting the promise that the novel would arrive. At the time I had very little interest in detail. I mean, I still have very little interest in detail, which is a disaster, really.

Overall, the whole thing is structured like *The Human Condition*, by Hannah Arendt, so there was also the sense of not so much caring about the descriptions of things. You don't know where anyone is. Everyone is like in a non-place. You only know that the Golfer is on an eight-man sofa on his own. Or, you only know that the Screenwriter is in a room with no windows. Or the Politician is in the bathroom. There is no detail; it's very limited. I was sort of interested in that because, overall, the thing that I was trying to talk about was Hannah Arendt's concepts: labour and work and actions. I was trying to use them as vehicles to understand Hannah Arendt, so that everything was in the service of her ideas, all these characters were in the service of her ideas.

Every time I was trying to be a proper writer it was like … At the start of the novel you see it, I'm going to do these really detailed descriptions of the Screenwriter: 'It's going to be as good as F. Scott Fitzgerald!' And then it was like: 'Oh that didn't work, it was just really clunky.' And that is not really what it was about, it was about a vehicle in service of a philosopher's work that I didn't understand. And I was trying to understand it through the vehicle of this promise to write a novel-kind-of-thing.

'But then I've only read about it on Wikipedia' (Spooner, 2013a, p. 43). It's so brutally honest. This way of disclosing the artist's creative process, of taking it from the solitude of her studio up to the open where everyone can witness the moments of hesitation, of silly ideas, is to expose yourself in a moment of

high vulnerability. What moved you to adopt such a strategy; is it related to the fact of writing fiction as part of your art practice?

I guess I am interested in the idea of something not arriving neatly, as if it had always been kind of perfect, or the act was like 'genius-at-work', or something like that. I am interested in those ways of getting there. Also the mundaneness and domesticity of writing in general. It's really self-deprecating, right? The novel is not self-deprecating but it is constantly talking through its own mechanisms. Obviously, one of the main devices in it is that I am always talking about the fact that I can't do it, or that I am bored, or hungry, or I don't want to be there and I am talking to the Copy Editor about this. That voice takes over the potential narrative and flips it up all the time. The line about the Wikipedia … I can't remember in what chapter in the book that happens, but again it's about that idea of the mundaneness of the research, the mundaneness of writing. You are just like googling shit and hoping for the best [laughs]. And then having a cup of tea and not writing anything, and then writing something, and then having nothing to write except for the fact that you looked something up in Google, or on Wikipedia and that's what you've got.

I wanted that writing to feel like it was as close as possible to this real time, to me dealing with this thinking out loud, and not like: 'Oh that can't go in because that's not clever, that's not appropriate.' It was like: 'I've just got to write a novel! So I've just got to keep going.' So everything went in.

In *Collapsing in Parts* there are at least two levels of fiction. The first one is a regular fiction told in the third person. Then, there is an interpolated metafiction told in the first person. Would the art project as developed in the form of Footnote events constitute a third level of fiction, a fiction that doesn't take place in the text but is expanded in the framework of the art project?

Yeah, they were a bit like in *The Human Condition,* which is the most amazing book of footnotes. I've never seen anything like it. She is always speaking through other people, in fact, in the footnotes. You could spend 20 lifetimes just by reading all the books and the different theories referenced in the footnotes. I guess I was interested in that as a potential space of knowledge production, of working things out. The Footnote events were not directly related to the novel, I'd say, but they were very much about some core concepts that were coming out of the writing process, like me needing to think about them, or perform them, or work through them. So they became side projects where, for example, while writing about it I'd come up against

the difference between solo high performance and collectivity, and I thought: 'Well, I am kind of talking about this here but I want to talk about it in a bit more detail.' So it needs to stage a musical vaudeville play at the ICA (Spooner, 2012a; Figure 12) that can explore it in more detail. They became portals to do bits of research that were bigger than the novel. I couldn't have got there if I had written them in the novel, that's why I called them Footnotes. It's another level of research, it's literally footnotes. It's like something that takes you somewhere else. If you follow it, you end up in another space where there is a whole lot of research that relates but is much more detailed.

Who is the narrator, another fictional character? Is it possible to separate the narrator's voice (abstract, timeless) from the artist's voice (Cally Spooner in 2011 working on her project at International Project Space)?

To me, the narrator, the actual core narrator, not the Screenwriter, but the narrator who is in conversation with the Copy Editor – to me, that is obviously just me. It was almost like writing in your notebook or whatever. And the Copy Editor is my mum [laughs]. It's totally domestic. For me, it's like first person. The Copy Editor is a 'he' and I don't have a gender. You don't know the gender of the narrator. The Copy Editor is a man. … I can't really see it as anything other than me trying to write a novel … but it could be someone else. It should be really. It could have been more interesting if I had hidden it a bit more.

The Copy Editor's role exceeds that of text corrector, he's a male, judgemental figure. He represents the superego that watches the artist whilst she works in solitude, making her doubt, correct her own words, and increasing her anxiety. It resonates with the voices that demand structure to the Screenwriter and the Golfer's colleagues who press him to continue working. Would this figure reappear in the form of the audience that attended your Footnotes?

No, I think it's different. … I am interested in that polemic between the promise of high performance and the deadening impact that that was having on meaningful communications, in some kind of way. … They all [the different characters] have these personal neuroses and they don't want to deliver. It's also like they are potentially trying to produce a different form of life and they are not allowed to produce a different form of life because they have to labour.

And that is also what happens to the poor Golfer. The Golfer has the worst time. The three men are based on, actually all their language is from Accenture, the high-performance business company, because Tiger Woods seemed to be their poster boy until he had an affair, and then they sacked him, they replaced him with a sheep. That actually happened. This idea of a potential form of another way of living and making is constantly upset by the demand to perform simply, straightforwardly, and with efficiency. Obviously, that has [a] really bad effect on the characters and they just end up being lethargic and inactive, basically because of these high-performance demands being placed on them.

The audience that was following your Footnotes, in a way, could play this role of the superego (the judgemental Other). Did you expect to get some response that you could incorporate in the writing process? Why did you decide to make it public, to stop the writing process more or less every month and then do a public event where you were exposing the process?

Because that is what the Hannah Arendt text is about anyway. It's about public life and the potential of trying to understand this notion of the potential … I suppose it's about thinking about this idea of excellence or advancement only being able to happen before an audience and that being what performance is about. … The text is also about thinking about these ideas of privateness and publicness. Public life is becoming distorted by a space to practise and achieve excellence rather than politics. So I think the out loud thing was very much about a gesture to think through the Hannah Arendt text and the idea of the *vita activa*, but also it's got personally to do with knowing that I wouldn't write unless I was under the duress of public expectation, somehow.

I make live work. I do work stuff out in front of an audience in a way, so it made sense for it to be like that. … I'm also saying a very basic thing: I wouldn't have written it if I had just been relaxed at home writing it in my own time. I can't work without a deadline. I wouldn't have done anything. I needed that pressure and I needed the eight months. And I got eight months, and that is also why the project is talking about the mechanisms of performance – the mechanisms of promising and delivering, and that being what performance is. I am a lazy writer. I don't do it unless it is for something.

An artist's novel is a hybrid and also ambiguous object: should your novel be read as a regular narrative fiction work or as an artwork? Do you think that

both modalities of reading can be simultaneous (and how could such a thing be possible), or does one prevail over the other?

When I wrote it, my goal was to write something that you would be able to buy at WHSmith [laughs], you know, just like a real high street bookshop. I just wanted to do that and I still like that idea. Even with my designer, I was like: 'No, I just want it to look like you're able to buy it at WHSmith.' And now it's a kind of compromise between the two in terms of design, and also content and stuff. Obviously, it is interesting to think of it as an artwork as well. But I think also that, within this stupid idea that you would be able to buy it at WHSmith, was also this weird performance challenge, which is like: 'I want to write a proper book.' So it's still an artwork. It's an artwork about high performance and the deadening impact that has on a kind on a different kind of life, a form of life that is nascent and indirect and private, actually.

It's also true that the book has a life of its own. People who didn't attend your projects in Birmingham might read the novel afterwards. Do you think it's important for them to know that it was part of an art project?

No, no, no. I wanted every chapter to be self-sufficient, so that if you just read one chapter it'd be fine. I wanted the novel itself to be self-sufficient and I also wanted it to make sense if you understood it in terms of a bigger project. I wanted it to work on every level. And, actually, the chapters do work on their own. Some of them got published in magazines, and parts of different things along the way, like excerpts. They worked fine like that as well. It's self-sufficient. I think it's self-sufficient. I hope it's self-sufficient.

Mai-Thu Perret is a Swiss artist, author of the artist's novel *The Crystal Frontier* (Perret, 1999–). The interview was held on 28 January 2015.

[David Maroto:] **Before you started *The Crystal Frontier* project, were you aware of other artists' novels? Did you read any before producing yours?**

[Mai-Thu Perret:] Most of my interests were literary rather than books by artists. But I didn't think that I was the first artist to write a fictional story, that's for sure. It's hard to look back, but I don't think I had any specific novels by artists in mind when I was writing. There were things that were fictional, like books by Liam Gillick. The one I remember about was like a rework of William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890). There was a lot of utopian writing, artists' writing, but mostly they were accounts of living in the desert, a sort of drop-out. I don't think I had any specific novel by an artist in mind.

In a previous interview, paraphrasing Sol LeWitt, you described *The Crystal Frontier* as 'a kind of machine that makes the art' (Perret, 2008, p. 176). What is the reason to render the objects made by the community actual? In other words, what does it add to actually make the objects that already exist in the fiction? Isn't it redundant?

It's never the same objects, is it? The specific reason to make these objects is the gap between a description and the physical object, the thing that exists. There's an extra narrative space that happens when you make an exhibition, or when you create objects, and in fact it very often ends up contradicting the story that you wrote, causing all these problems.

Even the artists that don't write stories, who don't proclaim the fact that [it] is storytelling, at the heart of the work, if you look at the works together, you get something that is narrative. Walking through an exhibition is a kind of natural narrative experience that happens to the viewer. Probably because we are narrative animals. There's a basic function in our brains, when you see something … especially the white cube environment is such that you're instantly put in this detective position of the viewer saying, 'I have historical knowledge about this; I know what this is; I think this is there for this reason', or 'I know about the artist', or 'I know these works'. Maybe you sit there looking at these things together and it tells you something. For me that was the main interest in making the things, the actual

things. As I started to make the objects and sort of materialize this universe it ran away from the text.

You always want to be something else than what you start with, or what you are, or what you identify with. Mine is a literary background, I studied literature, I didn't go to an art school, but I was always sort of interested. I don't know why but I always wanted to make artworks. There was this sort of stepping away from my space into another space and in some ways the book, the fragments are very much a stepping stone.

The text of *The Crystal Frontier* is made of what seems to be found fragments in the abandoned commune. My impression is that these fragments are not entirely able to sustain the work of fiction by themselves and they need the assistance of the objects to create the fictional world of *The Crystal Frontier*, as a proof of its existence. So that the novel does not provide a metafiction as an umbrella under which artworks are created, but there is a relation of mutual dependency between text and objects.

I agree with you that the fragments never provide a successful narrative, or a narrative that develops. There's no plot, for starts. I always found that as a writer I was completely incapable of imagining a plot. … For me it was obvious that *The Crystal Frontier* experiment was always going to be more like a set of postcards, small dispatches.

I've always been more interested in the in-between spaces where you fill in the gaps, where the reader has to fill in the gaps. In a sense, I'm very much of the classic conceptualist idea that the work doesn't exist without the viewer and it's not finished till she's there, it's completed by the viewer. If you start to think like that it makes sense to leave many things open because that's where it really happens. When I was writing *The Crystal Frontier* I was pretty much thinking about stuff like that. … It was important for me to have all these holes, so to speak.

But the objects very quickly took [on] a life of their own. For example, I made a series of works called *25 Sculptures of Pure Self-Expression* (Perret, 2003; Figure 17), which is basically the product of a kind of workshop between the characters of the community, and it's not even described in *The Crystal Frontier*, although you could think that I did it because it could have fit very well in the story. … Before I was making a lot of things that were more utilitarian, examples of products from the

community, like the architecture for rabbits that they built, or the kind of furniture that they had. It was all practical and also quite simple. The symbolic dimension was there but it wasn't the principal thing. The relation between the text and the objects was more straightforward. And then, when I got into this self-expression business, there started to be all these symbolic relationships and the narrative started to happen within this set of objects, and it was not described in the text. That started to mark the demise of the text, in a way.

When I did this thing for Basel, the *Statements* (Perret, 2004c), I treated these 'solo objects-proof' as a market stand. I wanted to make a one-to-one reproduction of a market stand, because there was always this idea that the women in *The Crystal Frontier* would sell their stuff to the market, to survive. And I thought: 'OK, let's make the products that they sell and display them in the art fair.' So there's a kind of mix in the mirror image, the fair is the market; quite simple but it was fun.

And then I made these papier-mâché mannequins (Perret, 2004d) that were wearing clothes. I asked my friend Ligia Dias, who is a fashion designer, to do the clothing. It was all inspired by Russian Constructivism designs.

I had two text panels printed on the wall (Perret, 2004b; Figure 19) that told you what you were looking at. One was an orange poster that said 'Bake and Sale Theory', and it was an announcement for a sale. This was actually produced as one of the [*The Crystal Frontier* text] fragments. And on the other panel there was a diary extract that was laid out differently with the font that I always use for laying out the text when I do these panels for exhibitions or free prints. It said: 'She wants to destroy everything she used to be before.' The narrating voice is describing another character, and that character accuses her of selling everything they make. There's a long text on why this woman thinks that it is dishonest to sell their productive labours. The two posters are contradictory: one is basically saying 'I am against this type of selling', and then there's the other poster advertising the sale itself. Obviously, within the narrative construct of the story, I was imagining a typical kind of communal situation where there could be dissent and the members wouldn't agree with what was going on, where everyone would criticise it.

And then there were all the objects that were on the stand (Perret, 2004c). The text was making reference to pseudo-liberals smoking addictive-free cigarettes, strolling around the aisles of the market place, and this was very much about people walking around the art fair itself (I think at the time you could still smoke inside the fair, which

is not possible anymore). This was the point where the story and the artworks were quite continuous; they overlapped quite neatly. But, at the same time, these figures were like characters, and I know that lots of people almost thought that the mannequins were … there was a sort of blurry distinction between shop mannequin and prop, or sculpture, or statue. Later I did another show using the same type of mannequins, basically making them as scale sculptures that stood with neon [lights]. It escaped the story; these sculptures became their characters.

The Crystal Frontier **has been only partially published in a catalogue (Keller, 2008). When will you consider the project (and the writing process) finished? Do you have plans to publish it as a novel? Have you been in contact with editors or publishers?**

I don't really have plans. I haven't written that much of it, so I don't know if it makes sense to publish it as a novel on its own, although it could be a nice object. But I'm quite happy to leave myself the liberty of suddenly … I don't know why, I don't want to close it. It would be quite easy to say it is over, it's a story that makes sense for a certain amount of time, but I find it quite useful for myself and for the rest of the work in general, that's why I leave it open. I'm always waiting for the moment when I have the drive to add something to it, but it doesn't necessarily come, if you see what I mean. I actually use it a lot as texts in shows, and I think in the end it's more important to me than to do it as a book individually, for now.

I haven't written a new one [a new fragment of *The Crystal Frontier*] for a while but I still like to have these posters with these extracts of text that are in the exhibition – because there's a different problematic in relation to their status, which is the question of the exhibition label and the didactics, the wall texts, and so on. I really like that I can use these fragments as my own didactics, my own wall text. If you read a fictional piece of text and you look at an object, it completely changes the way that you are looking at what's around you. That for me is a more useful tool than having a book that exists on its own. It's a two-part thing, in a way. It's hard for me to see the text on its own, I like it best when it's a panel on the wall and in relation to something else, even if it's only in relation to a painting, for example. The status is strange, when you are reading it next to an abstract painting and you get all these questions about signs and language, why some are signs readable, why some are just symbolic. All this stuff is for me more interesting than a purely novelistic

approach, which would be reinforced by putting it up as a proper book. In the end I spatialise everything, even the text.

When I think of artists who write their own narratives in the form of novels I wonder if the artist is taking over the responsibility of generating the text – a piece of text that mediates between the artwork and the spectator – in a narrative form, that was usually delegated to a third agent (art critics, art historians, or curators).

Yeah, at least for a generation of people since definitely the 90s, if not the 80s, it works like that. I assume that it would be different if you look at older examples.

Of all these sorts of 'side positions' that you can inhabit as an artist, on top of being the person who makes objects, I think the curator is one of the positions that I play with, or occupy all the time. And, in that sense, I'd say that how I feel about my work is like writing in space, basically putting together some kind of narrative in some kind of space, in the way that you would in a book, but it actually happens through curating, or through the way that you place objects in space. … It's also fun to play with the conventions of the exhibition, you can turn them against themselves. Also, today we live in a museum and institutional culture that is so bent on explaining everything to death with education. As if people needed everything to be explained, and [to be] told what they are looking at. Sometimes the best way is to pretend to be giving an explanation. If you give a piece of narrative it doesn't deliver any explanation at all, it complicates it, I suppose.

I read something that you said in a previous interview in relation to the exhaustion of the notion of autonomy in the visual arts. I'd like to quote you: 'Although the old shell of "autonomy" is clearly problematic and fell apart for understandable reasons, we're hard pressed to find any better alternatives' (Stroun, 2008, p. 55). Is fiction such a better alternative?

Maybe. You can think of autonomy as a fiction as well. What I was saying is just that, obviously, a completely autonomous object is an idealised thing and it poses lots of problems because it negates lots of realities, and because it closes down thinking, in a way. It's usually quite authoritarian. But objects that are completely context dependent and that have no space of their own without that completely didactic support, or spaces for didactic projections, are not a good solution either for art. I think we need things that resist understanding. You need it in literature and you

need it in art. In order to be able to think you need to have something that cannot be thought, otherwise everything dies and becomes mechanical. Fiction can serve that role, and abstraction can work like that. Maybe it's negativity, but it's just about freedom, in the end.

I was wondering if you knew a short story by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes called *La Frontera de Cristal* (1995).

I never read it but if you tell me the reference I will definitely do [so]. The thing I was thinking about [when I was writing *The Crystal Frontier*] was J.G. Ballard's *The Crystal World* (I mix all these crystal things) and of course Robert Smithson with *The Crystal Land* (1996, pp. 7–9), an essay that I think was published in Harper's Bazaar with all these things about entropy. I was quite into Smithson's writings. And Ballard's was totally fascinating to me, it's very literal. … It's really psychedelic and very, very beautiful.

What's the status of the project? Do you still work on it, or did your plastic, visual work develop and walk away so far that it's not connected to this project anymore? Did you start new projects in the meantime?

I've done a lot of projects that were very narrative but more self-contained, maybe because they were film-based, one work around one character, very often historical characters.

I've done it more about specific objects, but occasionally I still make things that could be made out of *The Crystal Frontier*. It's still a place that makes a lot of sense to me. I always want to write more fragments and then I make an artwork instead, I guess. Usually that's what happens. But the artworks are very much collated with … they are complex in a way that it's like in a little story. Recently, I am making all this stuff out of wicker: baskets weaved with it, and I made two donkeys out of this material. It's somehow very narrative, because it's conflating two things that are very much from the universe of *The Crystal Frontier*: this craft material and this animal that symbolises work and labour, these are things and ideas that are fundamental to the work. What is work, and what is the value of work? It's basically what I come back to all the time. That's why I don't kill it off.

Goldin+Senneby are a Swedish artist duo based in Stockholm and the creators of the artist's novel *Headless* (2015). The interview was held between 3 and 26 December 2014.

[David Maroto:] **What are the reasons that motivated the creation of a project, which is not only narrative in nature, but makes such a narrative explicit in the form of a novel?**

[Goldin+Senneby:] The idea for the novel first came to us in front of a bookstand at the Frankfurt International Airport in 2006. This is how Alexander Provan (2015) describes it in his article *Headless Commercial Thriller*:

> They [Goldin+Senneby] imagined a proliferating cast of contractors and collaborators whose actions would be at times generated by the novel and at times cannibalized by it. The novel would eventually be published by a mainstream press, and so the conceptual art project would be insinuated into the world of commercial fiction. The dream: someone, say a business traveler on a layover at JFK, heads to Hudson News to pick up a Stieg Larsson novel, and out of the corner of his eye spots a hardcover emblazoned with the Acéphale logo: a cartoonish headless figure with a burning heart in one hand, an upturned dagger in the other, a skull covering his groin. (p. 13)

What came together in this formal decision was:

A. The possibility of approaching offshore as fiction, and through fiction. As spokesperson Angus Cameron has put it at several occasions: 'Offshore is not a real place, it is a real legal fiction' (Cameron, 2009, p. 36).

B. A formal relationship in *Acéphale* between the journal and the secret society – between text and performance. The journal *Acéphale* (and related writing) never reveals the activities of the secret society, but gives enough clues to assist in the mythology surrounding the secret society.

Before you started the *Headless* project, were you aware of other artists' novels? Did you read any before producing yours?

Sure. Some of the novel projects that were references for us at the time were Sophie Calle's appearance in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (Calle and Auster, 2007)*, Reena Spaulings* (Bernadette Corporation, 2004), and *Q* (Blissett, 2003); as well as the work with the character Annlee, initiated by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno (1999).

But equally important to us was an interest in the production models of book packaging companies (often working with a group of staff writers who collaboratively develop genre books; one might outline the plot, another writes scenery, and someone specialises in dialogue). Initially we had thought to collaborate with one of these companies as our 'companion writers'. But when we found this article by John Barlow, *I Coulda Been a Pretender* (2006) we thought he was the perfect fit for a ghostwriter, combining experience from the book packaging industry with a degree of self-reflection on the position of the pen for hire.

An artist's novel is a hybrid and also ambiguous object: should your novel be read as a regular narrative fiction work or as an artwork? Do you think that both modalities of reading can be simultaneous (and how could such a thing be possible), or does one prevail over the other?

Surely, there can be no *one* way of reading any novel, or artwork for that matter. But we think the letter from literary agent Edward Orloff, of McCormick & Williams, to Alexander Provan, regarding the commercial prospects of *Headless* might be interesting in this context.[46]

You are now engaged in the publication of *Headless* as a book. Could you tell me about the transition from being the result of an art project (and, as such, subjected only to the internal logic of the project it belongs to) to a piece of narrative fiction suitable for publication and distribution (and the role of the publisher and other agents in such transition)?

Please see Alexander Provan's article (him being the editor at Triple Canopy) reflecting on this very process, *Headless Commercial Thriller* (Provan, 2015).

I know Provan's text and I read it with great interest. I was surprised to read in it a quotation from Barlow: 'They [Goldin+Senneby] weren't so interested in

[46] A reproduction of Orloff's letter can be found in the present essay (Figure 27).

packaging the investigation as a novel' (p. 22). This affirmation would be in contradiction to your previous answers.

The *Headless* project is entirely made up of different people's interpretation of what the *Headless* project is. So it is only natural that there should be contradictions.

Provan and Barlow proposed different possibilities between publishing *Headless* as a booklet and as a bestseller novel: for example, to publish it as a print on demand book. Why weren't you satisfied with such a mid-solution, why this tenacity in having it printed by a mainstream publisher?

'Let's be honest. When you write an international murder-mystery, you want it to fly off the shelves. You're thinking about all those writers whose books you see in the airport' (K.D., 2008, p. 220).

My interpretation of *Headless*: I see an act of self-investment/self-investigation that sets the machine in motion. The double move of founding Headless Ltd. and to commission Barlow to investigate it begins a mystery ultimately based on its own nothingness. However, a novel, in order to be a novel (and to be published) needs an end. And *Headless* seems to have become an endless project with new ramifications that keep growing. Would the dynamic of the art project eventually work against the literary nature of the novel?

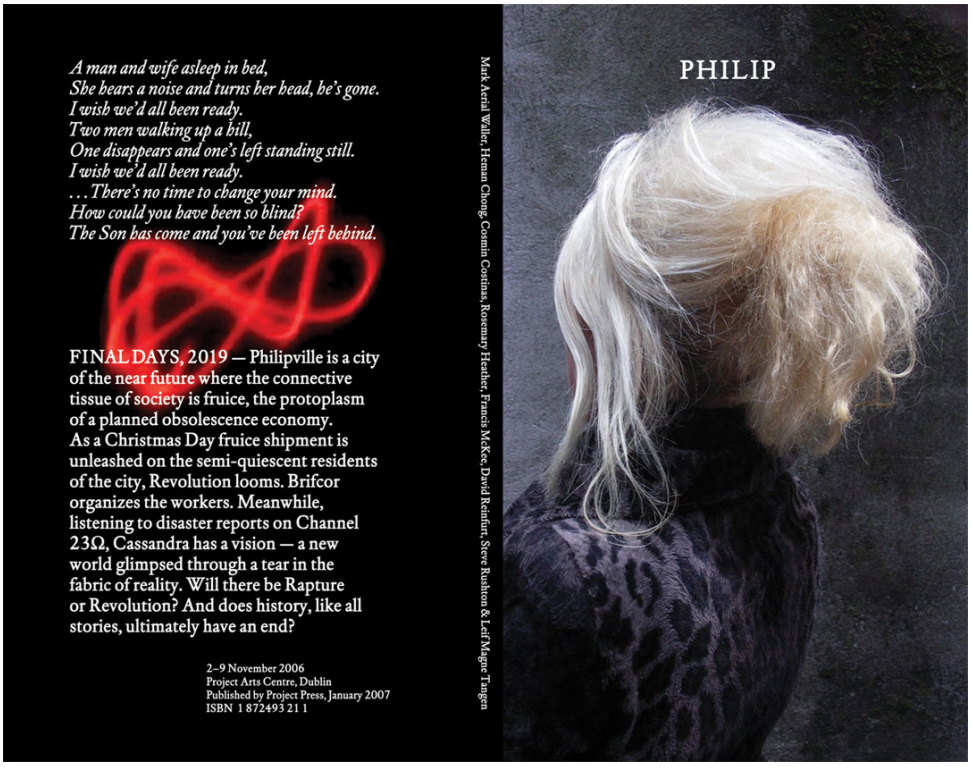
We are curious about your understanding that we would have founded Headless Ltd. What makes you believe this? To our knowledge Headless Ltd. exists as a company outside our control.

I have the impression that some visual artists have difficulties in understanding and, ultimately embracing, narrative. When they produce an artist's novel, it is based on a single idea, and it remains pretty much stuck at this initial idea throughout. The mere succession of events is not enough to create a narrative if there's no transformation through the vicissitudes told in the novel. Perhaps this has to do with the artist's mentality, still largely influenced by the legacy of Conceptual Art, in which the artwork equals an idea. You define yourselves as 'primarily conceptual' artists (Provan, 2015, p. 11). Do you recognise this as one of the reasons for the inadequacy of the artist's novel in the literary publishing world?

We have never tried writing a novel. But we have lived the life of two characters in a novel. In this context, we'd like to refer to a discussion about the performative and the public in an article by curator Kim Einarsson (2007–08):

> Kim Einarsson (KE): Which roles do they play themselves in this performance? The role of the artist, the actor, the researcher or the detective? Or are they just directors, handing out roles in this drama to other people?
>
> Spokesperson (SP): They play all these parts simultaneously. They direct the action by arranging the conditions under which the events are to be played out, but can never retain control of the sequence of events, or the reactions that arise.
>
> KE: What about the audience? Doesn't it follow that a performance should have an audience? Where does G+S have theirs? And I don't mean for the book readings from *Looking for Headless* [Goldin+Senneby, 2007–12], but during the "performative" working process?
>
> SP: There are several audiences. The audience encountering the project as presented in various art institutions, the readers of secondary information published by others. But also a number of individuals connected to the project as mentors, expert advisors, collaborators, etcetera who form an audience as well as contributing to the performance. When the novel *Looking for Headless* is completed, it will be presented to a readership outside the art world. Novels have entirely different potential channels of distribution, and hopefully *Looking for Headless* will be a bestseller. (Einarsson, 2007–08, pp. 111–112)

Francis McKee is an Irish curator and writer. He is the director of the CCA Glasgow, co-editor of *2HB*, a quarterly publication dedicated to artists' fiction, and co-author of the collaborative artist's novel *PHILIP* (Chong et al., 2007). The interview was held on 17 January 2015.



30. Heman Chong, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt, Steve Rushton, Leif Magne Tangen, and Mark Aerial Waller (2007) *PHILIP* [artist's novel].

[David Maroto:] **In the artist's novel, the editorial process is crucial, because it signifies the transition from a piece of artist's writing (subjected to the rules dictated by the artist's practice) into a novel: a readable, accessible narrative. Can you tell me about the role of the editorial board in the *PHILIP* project? I presume the editorial board had a strong role in taking the raw material and converting it into a novel.**

[Francis McKee:] Yeah, they kind of did, though there is always two sections to it, because the writers in a sense, although it was very fast, also did that as they went. There was a moment when we all sat down and went 'OK, what have we got? What haven't we got?' … So there was a lot of that happening as we went with the certain notion that it was going to be a novel, so it was always written from a point of view of narrative, and a kind of 'How does the story unfold?' So that was always the premise behind [the process] and the conversations were always doing that. And then at the end of the week, yes, they did take it away and I don't know much about that because I wasn't on that. It was probably May when we did a run through it and Steve Rushton … but I'm not really sure, I'm not really sure at all how that happened but it stayed pretty true to all what we had already conceived, because we already had a timeline, so if we wrote a scene for it where 'that' happened, then it had to stay there. We wrote a scene here, and it kind of had to stay there, so they probably just massaged the endings of one into the start of another and sort of filled in with cement the little gaps or the cracks.

So it wasn't like contributions were erased or minimised?

No, it all looked like it was still there and in the same order. It just felt a little bit more seamless, so I think it was minor and it was cosmetic, and it was continuity, and it was making it all come together. It felt pretty much as it was conceived and written during that week.

I think I was one of the most narrative writers, and also Steve Rushton. So probably our contributions are pretty whole. He wrote mostly in the present tense. I wrote mostly in the past tense. He mostly from the 'I' point of view: 'I'm thinking this, I'm looking across, I can see Mary.' And I wrote from: 'He ran down the stairs, he jumped in the car.'

And that was edited to be consistent or was it left like that?

We had two or three lines of narrative. The first night we all read chapters to each other. And then it was evident that we all came up with different characters, different situations, different plots. It was inevitable. So we picked characters, different plots, and different scenarios. We picked a city from this one, a character from there, a character from here, a kind of plot idea from somewhere else again. So if put all these things together we could make a plot.

It was a bit like that, where Steve was writing in the present tense and I was [writing] in the past tense. I can go across the city in three sentences. Steve's character tends to not leave the room very quickly, because it's written in the 'I' and present tense, so it's harder to move that way. Mark Aerial Waller started writing beautifully in a really pornographic way. Those bits were also intertwined but took a totally different direction. And that was very healthy, because maybe Steve and I were thinking 'This is a novel' and were writing a classic mainstream novel, at speed. Mark was going with a character that suddenly developed a six-pack and is having sex with the other character while she's strapped to … it just totally derailed everything. And it was very good, because it's not a straight novel; he took it somewhere else.

A project like *The Drumhead* (Bibby, 2014c) has enjoyed much institutional support and, in addition to this, there are other agents that intervene in the publication process of the resulting novel. With so many agents at play, where do you identify the locus of the project's content (artist, curators, editor, publisher)?

Yeah, that's interesting because the work's so complex. It seems to have gone through so much before it came here. And there was [Natasha] Soobramanien as well, who is the editor. … Our collaboration was probably giving Gerry Bibby that room and stepping back. That gave him a time at the right point for him to assess what he had done, and trying to piece it all together, make the links. … He did a whole wall of A4s that were beginning to have arrows between them to make links and work out a more coherent structure perhaps for the final run through. I think that is what he got from us. He came up in the middle or towards the end of that process to go through what he was doing and to discuss it as well. And then the performance was almost a performance of the timeline, via the timeline, indicating it and using it as a visual structure for the performance.

I was asking because I'm concerned with the role I should take if I start in the PhD practice phase, if I start a project where I am not the artist writing the novel but I invite someone else to do it, and I accompany the process. Where is the production of content? What is my role in all this? That's why I'm interested in your point of view as a curator: what share do you have in the creative process?

There are probably two different questions [here]. There are roles as curator and … because it was a residency, we made sure he was supported in the residency but we didn't try in any way to influence the content. We tried to support him and we tried to give him the help he needed any time he asked for something. But then he also had an editor who was going to turn up and go 'No, that's not good, now we should rethink that'. So the last thing he needed was a second editor.

But I think you might have to work more as an editor. When you commission something, you're almost like a publisher. And maybe they [the artist] have the content idea, but then you begin to look at that more as editor and say, 'That's good but it's going off track here', or 'This is too long'. You intervene in that way so you're not dictating the content exactly, but you are feeding back on fields as an editor or a reader to be working.

I think also when there is an editor involved that's the editor's job, so as curators you just step back and let the editor come in. And support him no matter what happens even if there's tears the next day.[47]

How should one show the artist's novel and the art project to which it belongs? Many of these projects are intended to provide an immersive experience to the spectator but, because the institutional inadequacy of showing a kind of art that demands a different kind of temporality and protracted engagement, many times the spectator only has access to fragments that belong to a larger narrative. How can one make such narrative visible, readable?

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[47] [Off the record] The role of Gerry Bibby's editor, Natasha Soobramanien, is crucial because of the fragmentary nature of the art project that produced *The Drumhead* (Bibby, 2014c). It was created in collaboration with many art organisations and with many agents involved. The editor is the one who provides coherency to the written material in order to become a novel.

That's tricky. It is probably case-by-case. I'm trying to think who it would be. But sometimes there's a whole timeline of work so that you can't exhibit it all, only indicate some of it. I try to make it as comfortable a space as possible so a lot of people have different experiences of time with the thing, or to allow people to steal it. Or give them a copy and send them home, and use the exhibition to give them the context, hopefully enough context to make sense of what they have in their hand to read. Almost an explanation as you would do if you were at part three of a movie but people never got a chance to see parts one and two. You're trying to fill that in if you can, and if you can show all of them, that'd be great. I think you have to deal with them case-by-case. Because there is a lot about pleasure in there as well – the narrative thing, and the expectations, the time, all of those things are very different from a gallery experience and so galleries are antithetical to that.

It can be a problem sometimes because I see that a lot of artists are turning to narrative, but I also see that there could be a kind of inadequacy. A lot of art spaces are not prepared to show this kind of work or to engage with the artists enough time to display this narrative.

It's true. Also some of them should maybe not be displayed. Some of them should be put on a shelf and you buy it, or you are given it and you take it home and read it. Maybe the gallery is the wrong place. There are traditionally great places to read books, like libraries, and the house, the bedroom. So why should a gallery displace that? And if it's going to displace it, then it should really commit to that. It's the same with some films now, when Steve McQueen finally gets to *12 Years a Slave* (2013). The gallery is exactly the wrong place to watch it. So then it becomes a cinema thing but it is still within visual art, and a visual art practice, but the gallery is not always the right place. And if you widen the context then there's alternative spaces, and there's land art, and there's artist-run spaces that aren't white cubes. So there is a good history to say that sometimes the gallery is exactly the wrong space. And to be honest to the medium, just like you'd be to a painting, you give it to someone and they take it home to read – that would be the way. Which works in a sense. Start it up, we make it as a book, put it on a shelf, it's at Waterstones and you can buy it, take it home. But still it's within [the] visual art world. And the visual art world has that extent as well. I think that's important, especially with the novel because, you know, it's like playing tennis: you need a racquet and a ball – you want to be able to take the novel home and read it.

31. *2HB* magazine. Photo: Jamie Kenyon.

I always wondered why artists started to write novels. If you think about it, it's kind of a strange thing to do as an artist. It's not about forms or colours, or even concepts. It's really about narratives, stories, characters …

I know, it has come up for me in art writing as well. If you write catalogue essays, you can see there is a classic way to write about art that is so dull. People will start with a Jacques Rancière quote and then they will talk in that art language, and you'll say: 'My God, this is just like being a zombie. This is totally dead. What if I start an essay with: "I'd just killed him, but then the next thing that happened was that the police turned up. Well, there's a really good band on tonight …" What if I did that rather than talk about the art but actually refer to the art indirectly?' The artists will be saying to you, 'Why don't you write about something else rather than writing …' Because they are afraid of the people writing these kind of stupid essays, which are nonsensical at this point. They are so predictable. Why don't you write something else that sits obliquely besides the work and informs it but isn't directly about it? So you are in a dialogue with the artist, at which point things like narrative suddenly become really interesting. All the forms of a novel become possible because you might be writing a story, and that story will sit alongside their installation and never mention it. But if you read that story, hopefully it will inform or illuminate the installation in some oblique way, and a lot of artists get into that, I think.

So you think that artists could take the responsibility to write some body of text around the artwork that would mediate between the spectator and the artwork, which was normally delegated to a third person, like an art historian, art critic, or curator? Because this elaborated super specialised jargon is actually creating more obscurity than mediating and bridging the gap.

It is. It's just soul destroying. You read some of those things and you go … and artists don't want those things written about their work either. They're pinning it down in this desiccated art theoretical language. And you're thinking, 'Why not get someone else to do something more interesting?' People like Jeremy Millar and Liam Gillick, who are kind of on that edge of things. Matthew Barney is on that edge of things. Really the last thing they want is another essay that's going to say something predictable in a kind of art language, in International Art English. It's just not needed. They need someone who actually responds and pushes themselves a bit further. And so then you get those essays. They've probably had so many essays written about them already that are trying to pin down the work, that the last thing

they want is another one. So they are willing to invite someone to do something under commissioning. So they are commissioning something creative to go alongside their work and actually extends it somewhere else. So that could be interesting as well.

With the magazine *2HB* (Figure 31) you support the publication of artists' narrative texts. Is there some specific trait in artists' narrative fiction that is exclusive to it and not to be found in other, regular writers?

We have the most unwieldy conceptual strapline for *2HB,* which is artists' writing, or writers, or pieces within the context of visual art. I think that there are lots of technical devices that people use that are just the same as those novelists will be using in the mainstream world. … It's quite often similar except they're writing it within an awareness of the context of visual art right now. So they are writing it within a context of knowing about what's debated, how people are thinking about language, how people are thinking about images today, and they are writing within that context that is somehow obliquely referring themselves back to that context. Where someone like Will Self may be writing a novel that is experimental, it isn't referring itself [back] to the visual art world, [where he] may not know about some of those debates going on and may not be placing himself in any way, positioning himself in relationship to them. I think the one thing that links all the people that write is they're positioning themselves in relationship to the visual art world. And writers and experimental writers outside the visual art world aren't.

So you think they don't refer so much to a literary tradition as much as they expect the readers to read it from a visual arts perspective?

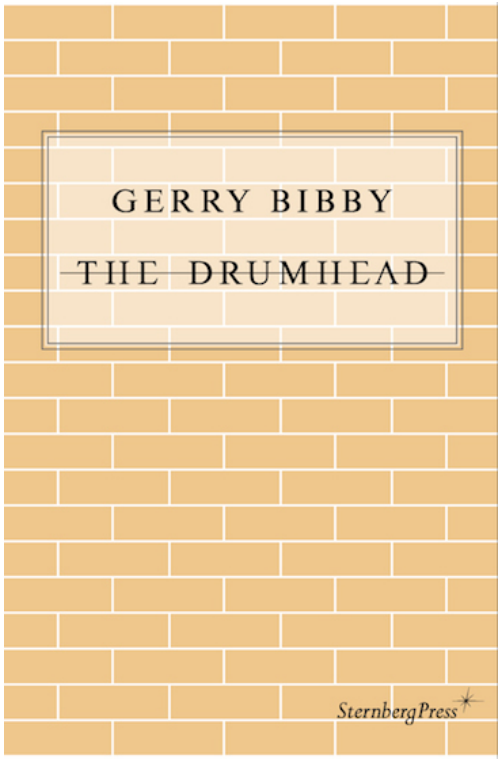
Yeah. I think they will expect you to know something that will be recognised, that they have drawn in a literary tradition, but that's not the main thing. Just like Steve McQueen will expect you know that there is a tradition of movies, or Douglas Gordon will expect you to know the history of Hitchcock, just normally. That's OK, but that's not their main point. Their main point is within the context of visual art. It's that they're doing it within the visual arts and a visual art context, and positioning themselves within visual art, [and that] would be the main aim of what they're doing. And I think that's often how we [*2HB* editors] intuitively can distinguish things coming in, especially for the first few issues. Everybody in the world sent us novels and stories from Australia through to America, everywhere. And a lot of them were just mainstream stories and novels, and there is nothing wrong with that, but they have

no relationship or an awareness of the visual art context, and therefore didn't necessarily need to be published in this magazine.

My opinion is that many artists use narratives because potentially they could extend or enlarge the field of contact beyond the art crowd, but, at the end of the day, the readership is still within this art crowd. Which is kind of a paradox.

It is. A good question is whether the artists really think that. Because if they do, why don't they just sit down and write a really good Stephen King novel, which I would really enjoy, you know? But you maybe do that … and that's really Steve McQueen. I come back to him sometimes in that, where did he make a decision with *12 Years a Slave* to become more mainstream or not? It's almost a decision to push it more that way, and away from the art world. They know their art world roots but it's really not made for the art world. So, *12 Years a Slave* is actually made for a mainstream audience. And I think it's very hard to see an art tic. Anybody can watch those movies without knowing anything about the visual art context, and just enjoy them. I don't know. But artists do sort of tend to warp the traditions so much that even if they are hoping for a bigger audience, there's no way. That's why we publish three-hundred [*2HB* issues].

Vivian Ziherl is an Associate Curator at If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part Of Your Revolution (IICD), Amsterdam. She curated Gerry Bibby's artist's novel's project *The Drumhead* (2014c) as part of IICD's Edition V: 'Appropriation and Dedication'. The interview was held on 22 April 2015.



32. Gerry Bibby (2014c) *The Drumhead* [artist's novel].

[David Maroto:] **Before you got involved in *The Drumhead* project, were you aware of other artists' novels?**

[Vivian Ziherl:] Not at all. The notion of producing a novel with an artist came very directly out of Gerry's practice itself. It wasn't something in IICD's agenda necessarily, although we had worked with Keren Cytter before – not myself but the institution. But that form was very specific to Gerry's practice and to the question that arose from our studio visits, which was how to draw forward his writing practice, which seemed to hold a very important place as a connective tissue between his image-making (sculpture or form-making) and performance, and given that there had been no formal publication of his up until that point. Which seems so striking, given how significant writing is to him, and given how significant writers are to him as references.

There are many artists who work with text, but to choose the novel is a very, very specific choice. You told me once that it emerged in a process of dialogue with the artists, that he didn't come with this pre-established idea. Could you tell me about the moment when this idea emerged?

Frédérique [Bergholt, co-founder and director of IICD], Tanja [Baudoin, curator at IICD], and I did a studio visit with Gerry in Berlin at the time he was in Künstlerhaus Bethanien. We saw everything he was working on. … He began to talk about his writing. And then also through our ongoing correspondence … his email writing was a beautiful part of his practice. The first step was deciding, with him, that it would be a great thing to publish something, given that writing was so important and that nothing had been published.

From there the question was what kind of book, and it was immediately obvious to all that it shouldn't be such an artist's publication, in terms of documenting the practice, having colour plates, essays by other people and such things by him, but that it should be a publication of primary text – where text is the primary protagonist of the book. The question was then whether it would sit between some kind of a collection of poetry or something that would be more like a novella. At the end, it was Gerry who really drove the determination that it would be a novella, that it wouldn't be a collection of loose texts, but it would be definitely internally coherent, narrative, and based on a set of characters. We always said 'novella' instead of 'novel' because there was always a notion that it would be quite short and also that it would be in a way very abstract. Yeah, that's the process.

In a previous interview (Radio Emma, 2014), Gerry speaks about his intention to 'perform writing' with this project. What about the reversed process: the transformation of the performative act into a narrative text? Because it seems like his infiltration into the crew that was building Guy de Cointet's stage was for him a way to create the narrative text. It was a performance of sorts.

… Certainly in the first round of his traveling with Guy de Cointet and *Five Sisters* there was also a kind of harvesting of primal material from that, such as photographs that went into his work that appeared in the Lyon Biennial (Bibby, 2013–14; see Figure 33). And it was a process of character development, very concretely, and a physical work of setting out a set of images that would be associated to categories produced through typography and through this kind of smileys. It was very physically a process towards the novel.

At a later stage, there were The Showroom (Bibby, 2014b), and Kunsthaus Bregenz KUB Arena (Bibby, 2014a) at an earlier point. And the degree to which they were intimately tied to the writing or an alibi for writing is something you'd need to ask him. Because it ties into the bigger economics of what this project was, which was finding a way to getting support along the manuscript's development period, and partnership with a number of art centres who, unlike us, are strictly geared towards a display moment. There are centres that have a floor space, and that needs to have something in it that an audience or a viewership can walk in and encounter. And that is one of the tensions of what writing is as a mode of artistic production when placed within a visual arts context. And that was one that Gerry encountered in a very direct way when developing the project.

What was your task exactly? What kind of working relationship did you have with the artist and with the editor?

I would say my role was more like a managing editor. Within IICD we commissioned the book itself and commissioned Gerry and tried to work with him to establish an infrastructure that would permit the thing to be produced. That included developing partners, raising funds, having residencies for him to work. And at a certain point it was clear that we would need an editor who was skilled in working with a novel form. Among the team here we had a certain experience with editing, but really of critical texts. And really not more than an essay length. So in terms of anyone who could help Gerry through the process of massaging characters into a novel, massaging dialogue and text into something that became a coherent form, it was

way beyond the capacity of anyone here. I said at a certain point that we needed professional help.

Fortunately, we work a lot with Will Holder and he recommended to us Natasha [Soobramanien], who was terrific, very specifically for the reason that she is trained in fiction, and is experienced in literature (she's published a book of her own and is working on another book with a collaborator) but she's very comfortable with the field and circulation of contemporary art. She's written for *Frieze* [magazine] and she moves through contemporary art circles as well. And for us that was a sort of magic combination. Because it was important that this be a piece of literature but [also] that it speak to Gerry's context, that it speak to a contemporary art context. In that sense Natasha really worked very closely with Gerry.

From the moment that he had texts that were even going to become a manuscript she was reading them, giving him feedback, they together were devising what his next steps would be, he would then go ahead and do that, send through the material, she would seep through it, put things in order, or make proposals to him about how things could be structured, and then they together would decide upon what his next course of action would be. I really followed that process rather than being intimately involved in it, and tried to keep an eye on the timeline. But really, from that point on, it was a very close relationship between Gerry and Natasha in terms of editing the text. Editing the text was almost part of producing the text, in this case, I think, the degree to which they worked together.

Did you contemplate the possibility of enlarging the field of contact with the audience, both through the narrative form (*in principle* one would assume that it's more accessible to non-art related audiences) and its potential to be mass distributed?

It could be but I still feel that, as much as I would love this book to infiltrate the world of literature and be recognised as one the greatest novels of our time, I don't think it's going to happen [laughs]. I still think that the person who picks up this book is going to be picking it up because they have an interest in Gerry, or they have an interest in IICD, or they like the books from Sternberg [Press], which are usually about contemporary art. I would love this infiltratory potential to be there, but I think it's small, in terms of what its actual force is.

The book has its own longevity, which is different from that of a theatre event or performance event, but I would personally consider that as different rather than greater or smaller.

IICD's Edition V under which Gerry's project took place was called 'Appropriation and Dedication'. In retrospective, how do you interpret the term 'inappropriate' in the context of *The Drumhead*'s project? I somehow relate it to the 'inadequacy' of a project for an institutional exhibition setting (it cannot be shown as a whole but only as fragments of a larger narrative), which needs to invent its own mode of reception.

Yeah, I think that's hilarious. The question of the appropriateness of the production of the manuscript to a set of visual art shows was enormously provocative and materially, physically challenging. It was something that Gerry actually had to find the way to process through his practice, each time again, how he was going to maintain the space and time that was being set aside to actually produce the manuscript whilst still making visible that process.

I think, in some ways, of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's form of the external social moment and the internal private moment. Writing and reading are still configured as an internal moment. One writes a book within oneself, somehow. As opposed to the action of painting which is caused in direct contact with the materials and is something external to the body. The writing of a book is something that is still thought to occur very much internally. The moment in which it comes out of the pen is very much the end of what that process is. Somehow that massive interiority and privacy needed to become massively exposed, which is an enormously fragile and vulnerable thing to do as an artist or as a writer. But that's what the convention of contemporary art demands, and I think it's extremely interesting again in terms of this macro-economic shift towards economies of performance, in which elements of social behaviour effectively are able to become commoditised.

33. Gerry Bibby (2013–14) *The Black Box Penny Arcade Peep Show / The Drumhead* [installation]. 12th Biennale de Lyon.

Natasha Soobramanien is an English writer based in Brussels. She is the editor of Gerry Bibby's artist's novel *The Drumhead* (2014c). The interview was held on 17 May 2015.

[Natasha Soobramanien:] I'm not going to speak for Gerry, this is a question you'll ask him yourself, but from my working with him, I think this idea of the fantasy of the novel is definitely something that seemed to motivate him. But as I understand it, the book was commissioned by If I Can't Dance [I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution] as part of this project, this cycle, and I don't think it was initially conceived as a novel. Or I don't think that he originally said that it would be a novel. Originally the idea would be a collection of his texts because he writes a lot as part of his practice, kind of gnomic, beautiful little texts. But he had the idea that he wanted to write a novel. It was a very definite idea of a novel rather than a book. And this was the point at which Vivian [Ziherl] asked Will Holder if he knew of any editors that might be able to work with Gerry and he suggested me. He knows me as a novelist.

[David Maroto:] **Before you got involved in *The Drumhead* project, were you aware of other artists' novels?**

Not artists' novels. I was aware of artist's fiction because I had contributed a short story to a project by the artist Chris Evans, called … the name escapes me. Anyway, it was an anthology of short fictions by artists. I think that was the first time that I kind of became aware that artists wrote fiction as well, in that way. I possibly was aware of the artist's novel. I don't know, I wasn't unaware. But it was through Gerry that I became more aware. And in fact, I think it was Adrian Rifkin who told me about your project,[48] so then I looked and I saw that there was this whole database.

What was your task exactly? Did you copy-edit the text? What kind of working relationship did you have with the artist and with the curators?

When I was commissioned, or taken on by the curating agency to edit, the idea was that I would be an editor, that there would be a manuscript that got handed to me, then I would help to structure it. But in actual fact, there wasn't really a manuscript so then my role shifted and it became … I don't know quite how I would define it. As

[48] The Book Lovers (Maroto and Zielińska, 2011–).

the manuscript evolved then there was more of a kind of traditional editorial intervention. But to begin with, Gerry and I would just have lots of conversations over email, and then he would pull together some texts, and then he gave me some strands of text. From that, we would talk and then he'd work more on it. Then it sort of grew from that.

So you were not correcting or checking the final text but you were helping Gerry to make decisions?

I was asking leading questions just to get him to focus on what he was doing. I had no agenda; I just wanted to kind of ask him questions about his intentions, questions that he would eventually ask himself. I just wrote some notes about my role. I put [in] there those conversations, teasing out his intentions and ambitions, and the themes, you know: 'What is this novel about?' And then I was offering structural guidance. It became apparent that there were three or four different strands, so it was a case of how we would talk about interweaving these strands.

It sounds to me as if you were guiding his initial, let's call it fantasy or ambition, towards a readable text, something that could be read as a novel because you know the conventions and the artist needed that guidance.

I definitely played the role of reader because at times I would read some of the things that Gerry sent me, and there might be some points of the text which were impenetrable. And the thing that I kept saying was: 'If you want to have obscurity in the text, that's fine, but let that be a deliberate choice and not something that happens because you've lost control of the language', and so on. So there was that conversation that was happening. Yes, acting the role of reader. There was a more editorial role when I had the sense of what his themes were, because I had a more objective position regarding the text. I was able to see whether there were points where, 'Oh, you might want to make more of this bit here', or, 'This is really interesting. Can you go and write more about this?'

I liked that you said the word 'guidance', meaning guidance towards something, as if you would have a clear idea …

It really doesn't feel like guidance, it was more sort of clarifying because, all of his process, I don't know how he did it, but I think there was a real force there, a real drive and he was just churning out this text, and there was a definite sense of purpose there. What there wasn't was a kind of sufficient perspective because it was

being produced in such a tight time frame as well. There wasn't so much time to set something aside and look at it afresh. So I was able to offer that contribution, but it was more about looking at what he produced and suggesting ways in which it might be made more coherent, or more structured. I think that was definitely the case. I think that the conversations were quite important even though they didn't necessarily seem important at the time: just general conversations about reading the text.

And then, finally, as the project came closer and closer towards the end, there was a more technical aspect in terms of line editing and reading things at the level of the sentence, and suggesting changes where things weren't clear.

Gerry was producing text as part of his work but this text could still be defined mainly within the limits of artists' writing or art writing, which is justified or defined within the logic that governs the rest of his project. But then a novel is something else. You have to refer to, or address at least, an issue of readability, and maybe that's where your role was?

That definitely was part of it, yes. I think so. And maybe a sort of gesture towards textual unity or not-unity, an acknowledgement that that's one of the attributes of the novel, even if you chose at the end to refuse that. Maybe to raise some of those questions. That's what a novel does. It sort of raises those sorts of questions. That's what we were doing in our conversations as well.

Throughout the narrative text there are interpolations of 'Documents', which are notes from the protagonist's notebook. Could you tell me about the function of these text-within-the-text sub-layers?

The Documents (Gerry might remember it differently, I'm not sure), to me, seemed to relate to the issue of managing the narrative and maintaining control of it. They do help to structure that particular section which gave us the most difficulty in terms of it being really impenetrable. There were lots of ideas in there and a lot of concerns that I think Gerry didn't have sufficient time to think through, and the Documents became a really useful way to manage the unfolding of that particular narrative. They are also a way of commenting on process because it was a very particular process that produced this novel. I think it's in the back [cover] that he wrote it in six months, under the complete pressure of [a] deadline and moving. He was doing a series of shows in different cities and producing these texts alongside so they

necessarily include a lot of the concerns that he had at that time, so there are a lot of themes in there of feeling displaced or inhabiting other spaces.

I was interested in your role in this transformative process. Did he need your help as an editor to transform the documentation of these performances into an atemporal narrative fiction? This would be the guidance we were talking about before.

I guess, because what you have here (the embedded texts which are residual traces of the performances) sit within a broader narrative. … We were talking about the different roles I have taken on throughout this project, and one of them was as the reader, as a kind of innocent reader who doesn't know, who has just taken the text on its own terms. So there would be moments when I was completely lost and that's because there had been no guiding of the reader. And that might have been the moments when he had directly transposed something from the performance into the text, without thinking through how that might be explained to a reader, or how it might have come about. It just seemed to come out of nowhere, as far as the reader was concerned. So then the question was, did he want to leave the reader feeling completely bereft like that? Or, did he feel like he would want to go back a bit and somehow engineer things so that the moment that he's describing has a kind of logic? My role would be to ask the questions that made him make those decisions.

I was put in the role of the reader at several moments in the writing of this text because there were times when Gerry seemed to be working oblivious to the fact that somebody would be reading it. So that had to be addressed at that time.

Do you think that the resulting novel can be read as an autonomous piece of narrative fiction, or does it still need to be read in connection with the project where it emerges?

That's really interesting. I do think it's something that can be read on its own terms. At one point when there was more obscurity in the text than there is now and we were at a kind of an impasse as how to negotiate that, I suggested that he write an author's note or preface. I said: 'It doesn't have to be used. It's just to [be] clear in your mind how you want to progress. Just as an exercise is a useful thing to do.' And he did it, and he wrote this fantastic thing, which didn't at all explain anything, but seemed to shine a light on something. And he didn't use it in the end. No, and I can see why he didn't. I see Gerry as a writer. It may be that, to the average reader,

this is unreadable in the end; it doesn't work as a novel for whatever reason. But I very much think he's a writer. And I mention this because you are quite determinedly making a distinction between the two.

Clive Phillpot is an English curator, writer, and librarian. Between 1977 and 1994 he was the Director of the Library at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where he founded the Artist Books Collection. He has written and edited numerous books, essays, and articles on the topic of the artist's book,[49] whose concept he crucially contributed to defining. The interview was held between 30 April and 28 May 2016.

[David Maroto:] **I understand that one of your missions when you took the position as head of the library of the MoMA in New York in 1977 was to create a collection of artists' books. What was your ultimate goal in creating such a collection? Was the legitimation of an incipient artistic medium one of your motivations?**

[Clive Phillpot:] I should say that I did not go to MoMA with a mission. I went instead as an explorer, not a missionary. It so happened that early in 1977 when I went there for my interview, their exhibition *Bookworks* was on display, which coincided nicely with my interests. This also gave me the opportunity to talk about my experience with artist books. The result was that I felt there was an open door to proceed with making a collection. I should also say that by this time I considered that any library wishing to document contemporary art could not ignore artist books as a constituent element of the collection, thus 'legitimation' was not an issue. It was just good practice.

In one of the texts included in *Booktrek* (Phillpot, 2013), when talking about the fate of the artist's book from a present perspective, you state that

> **The dreams of many for accessible art were rudely shattered. But some ingredients of this dream had never been very realistic. The dream that artists' books could be sold cheaply at supermarket checkout points, for example, disregarded the arcane content of most existing artists' books. (p. 160)**

[49] In this interview, Clive Phillpot uses 'artist book' and 'artist novel', whereas I use 'artist's book' and 'artist's novel' in order to keep consistency with these terms as they appear throughout the thesis.

At which point did you realise that the aspirations for the artist's book to be a 'democratic art form' were a dream rather than an effective reality?

This piece of writing was one of my attempts to burst the uncritical bubbles that were repeated over and over again in magazines and exhibition catalogues. However, it was still my belief that artist books could be, and often were, accessible – even expendable – art forms. In recent years another generation has been winnowing artist publications and choosing to reprint earlier works that originally appeared in small editions. This is the key to accessibility. Reprinting!

I would say that there are two ways of understanding (increased) accessibility. One implies that the artist's book is cheap, portable, and mass distributed. The other one affects the contents, which should be comprehensible to non-art related audiences. Would the confusion between these two be the reason why the 'supermarket fantasy' was never realised?

Well, David, I have criticised artist books as often having 'arcane content' but that objection was rather overdone in order to attack the various clichés that were in the air. However, to paint with such a broad brush in a calmer more balanced discussion such as this one, is not appropriate. For in reality, for me at least, it is often arcane content that draws me in to a book in the first place. So perhaps I would here pull back from the idea that artist books 'should be comprehensible to non-art related audiences', and say simply that artists might reflect on the potential audience for their publications when they are packaging their ideas.

If artist books were not relatively 'cheap', 'portable', and ideally capable of being 'mass distributed' I would lose interest in the medium. The price, the affordability, tells us about the aspirations of the artist/author.

I am interested in understanding the fantasy of the novel, which, I believe, is mainly about increased accessibility. Thus, I wanted to discuss the artist's book from the same perspective, rather than from our art world point of view. For us, confronting arcane contents might be exciting, but, when one wants to distribute one's artists' books in a train station, it might be necessary to think differently if one wishes to reach a different audience.

Another way of connecting artist books with trains, and with a public, has been for the artists, or their helpers, to simply leave books randomly on the seats of trains for commuters to take away should they be sufficiently intrigued. But if the train station

is your distribution site then connecting with an audience is not so simple. In fact this specific launch pad seems to me to have no advantage over a bookstore, except for the fact that the artist books get much closer to their potential audience in the cramped surroundings of a station, and that commuters often have time on their hands.

Connecting an artist book with a reader depends upon several factors. Perhaps I can simplify the situation by listing just three: the content of the book, the look of the book, and the cost of the book. Perhaps the content of the book is less of an issue when the look and the cost are both attractive? Excellent visual presentation of difficult content might be very significant in helping such ideas to travel.

Why do you think that artists are so attached to the book format exactly at the time when its obsolescence appears to be irredeemable? Do you see an element of fetishism in the production of artists' books that would make it the preferred option over digital editions? After all, books can be possessed and collected, and retain a sensuous component that its electronic counterpart has not.

Fetishism of aspects of the traditional book was what was being fought against in the 1970s and 1980s. This happened in parallel with the rise of cheap paperback art at that time, and probably as a reaction to it. There was an increase in the exposure of books made by artists that featured highly conspicuous materials or bindings (and feeble content), made even more precious when the edition comprised only one copy. Such overblown and expensive books veered into becoming mute book objects. But you might be right in suggesting that there is an element of fetishism in the very act of producing artist books today or, if not fetishism, then nostalgia, given the apparently irresistible rise of the digital.

But then again, in the face of your assertion that the book's 'obsolescence appears to be irredeemable', I feel that I must re-emphasise what an efficient device the codex book and, beyond this, the contemporary paperback is. The codex has been around for centuries, and most such books, such devices, are very efficient (do I need to repeat that they do not require batteries?). Their common features are also remarkable for facilitating and articulating narratives, whether verbal, visual, or verbi-visual. So I reckon that there is a lot of life left in the old dog yet. You also mention that they can possess a certain sensuousness! Yes, indeed!

Would there be a correlation between the creation of the MoMA collection (and the legitimation of the medium that it entailed) and artists' books becoming commodified like any other artwork?

I think that we can talk of two criteria that affect the commodification to which you refer. The first is the size of the edition, the second is the intellectual or aesthetic value. Small editions equal rare books! But a book can be rare and still have no financial value if the intellectual or aesthetic value is nil. It is when this second attribute is both significant and is coupled with rarity that the market price shoots into the stratosphere. And, of course, sustained aesthetic value is almost unpredictable as well as being the product of many sensibilities.

In your text *Books by Artists and Books as Art* (Phillpot, 1998), you enumerate a series of categories derived from the artist's book:

> **Among the many categories in this spectrum are these: magazine issues and magazineworks; assemblings and anthologies; writings, diaries, statements, and manifestos; visual poetry and wordworks; scores; documentation; reproductions and sketchbooks; albums and inventories; graphic works; comic books; illustrated books; page art, pageworks, and mail art; and book art and bookworks. (p. 38)**

It caught my attention that you did not mention the artist's novel. I wonder why it has been disregarded by the art world for so long.

You are right David, I did not include artist novels in my artist books spectrum. First of all I should say that my categories were not meant to be exclusive or complete, and that artist books are mongrels. I was just trying to indicate the wealth of material that might be embraced by the term 'artist book' (a secondary motivation was an attempt to incorporate 'illustrated books' in this terrain).

As for 'artist novels' I did not think about such a category, and in the same way neither did I think about poets' novels or even accountants' novels. To me, the novel is a specific literary form that can be utilised by any group of practitioners. In addition, most of the time even 'experimental' novels, for example, are literary, whereas by contrast artist books can question every aspect of the book, and are frequently visual or verbi-visual entities in any case.

Something that I find surprising is the lack of literature on novels written by artists, let alone the artist's novel. This is not the case with poetry. Surrealist poetry, Visual poetry, Concrete poetry and, more recently, Uncreative writing, they are all well-known hybrids between poetry and the visual arts. I would like to know your opinion about the difference in the interest historically stirred in the art world by these two literary genres.

I guess that I have already suggested that my own awareness of the artist novel has been slight. And perhaps there are many others who have not been aware of the existence or substance of this category either. So if there is this gap in the secondary literature it seems to me that someone like you, with your knowledge and zeal, is ideally equipped to fill this void?

Alternatively, perhaps the artist novel is not such a natural bedfellow in among other artists' media?

The artists aspire to produce a work that is able to engage through reading pleasure. I am not saying this is the reality of the work, but [it is] part of the artist's fantasy of the novel. However, it is a fantasy that motivates artists to search for innovative means to accomplish it. Do you think that this account of the fantasy of the novel would resonate, at least partially, with a previous 'fantasy of the artist's book'?

Yes, I would think so. A word that jumped out at me from your preceding paragraph was 'pleasure'. Surely pleasure, though infrequently referred to, is an essential element of reading both artist books and artist novels ('reading' being understood in its widest sense). Your listing of the artist novel's functions suggests that they can be appreciated in very similar ways to other publications.

Alex Cecchetti is an Italian artist based in Paris and author of the novella *A Society That Breathes Once a Year* (2012), and the artist's novel *Tamam Shud* (2018). The interview was held on 16 May 2016, at the outset of the *Tamam Shud* project.

[David Maroto:] **Before *Tamam Shud*, were you aware of other artists' novels? Did you read any before?**

[Alex Cecchetti:] I wrote mine [laughs]. If there's something I read written by an artist, maybe it's Tom McCarthy. But even when I read him I didn't think about it as an artist's novel. I thought of it as a real novel. Also because his work was very much inscribed within literature, even when he was selling houses to the living in the other world. Even if it was like an act that you can think 'OK, this is an artist doing it', he has a way of doing it that is very much the way of a writer. I don't know if I can explain it. When I read it, I read it as a novel, not as an artist's novel.

Do you mean *Remainder* (McCarthy, 2012)?

Yes, *Remainder*. But, of course, I think it is an artist's novel. It is an artist writing a novel. But I wasn't really aware of other artists writing novels, apart from him. But then, this is something that we were discussing a long time ago with Francesco Pedraglio. I know that Falke Pisano was writing something, but it was more of a philosophical essay from the point of view of an artist. And then, of course, I knew Will Holder. He was trying to write a book chapter after chapter. I didn't read any of these things. They were happening while I was working on my own novel, they were happening at the same time. Then, honestly, I didn't know anything about it before. You see, I am pretty sure that there must be many artists that wrote novels before. Now, it doesn't come to my mind. I'm talking about our contemporaries. I'm not talking about the 1920s or something, because of course this happened already.

When did the idea to create an artist's novel first come to you? Was it triggered by The Novel As Fantasy's open call, or was it in your mind before that?

I wrote a novel, which is called *A Society that Breathes Once a Year* (Cecchetti, 2012), and it was based on a couple of performances that I had done. I wondered how I could transform these performances into something that is inscribed within a story, in a novel, with fictional characters that follow a plot. So that was already an

exercise that I did. And it happened that, at the end of the book, in fact I found out that the process of writing and inscribing these performances within a story gave me ideas for two other performances that I did after the book. So it was a real process of transformation. The performances inspired the book, and the book inspired new performances that happened just after. It's like an extension in the past and the future of the book.

Have you already begun to write the artist's novel *Tamam Shud*?

No, not yet. But some dialogues, some phrases and a little plot already happened in the performance that we did last Friday (Cecchetti, 2016a). Some scenes that we saw, some dialogues that we heard, some little monologues … will appear in the book. In a way, I didn't start writing the book, but the book is already written by the performance.

The two first performance episodes of your art project, *When Everything Is So Clean It Is Difficult to Remember Something* (Cecchetti, 2016a) and *Nuovo Mondo: Tour Guide of Heaven and Hell* (Cecchetti, 2016b) are works that you already did elsewhere. Why are you repeating them again in the context of *Tamam Shud*?

Because I'm thinking of this project at large. It doesn't mean thinking just about what will come after, but also about what existed before that can be inscribed within what we are doing now. It's a little bit like looking back at an archive and thinking: 'Oh, but this poem was already what I'm doing now. Can I put this poem in this novel now? And how will it fit?' I thought it was a good beginning, because the whole project is also about how to transform an artwork, a sculpture, a performance … how to transform it in order to fit the logic of this new narrative that I'm writing. So I presented *Tamam Shud* and I'm going to present *Nuovo Mondo*, but I'll change that, I will rewrite that, as I did with *Tamam Shud*, to be inscribed within this new direction.

In the description of your exhibition project, you say: 'These and other works have never been thought in the frame of the *Tamam Shud* project but they belong to my practice at large.' How do the exhibition, the performances, and the associated objects 'participate of the writing of the book'? In other words, how does the art project connect with the writing process?

If you want a very concrete example, there are some artworks that I wanted to do even before the *Tamam Shud* project. And there are other artworks that I want to do and are not connected to this particular story. Of course they are, in a certain way, because I think about them. So, in my brain, things must be connected somehow, unless I'm completely schizophrenic. But those objects don't really fit in the narrative. So the challenge is: 'I'm going to show these objects, how am I going to fit them into the narrative?' So the object itself will transform the story, because suddenly the story has to deal with a presence that is completely a stranger. It's a stranger in the story. It's like when you imagine a story and at some moment there is a new character popping up. And you have to deal with this character.

For example, there is this handrail from a staircase. I would like to transform this handrail to a sculpture, which is just one line of wood. If the spectators touch it and follow it from the beginning to the end, touching and following the curved line and twists of this handrail, they'll end up doing a movement that is a movement that ballet dancers do. So they will dance. Now, this object, when I thought about it, my concerns were dance, lines, touching sculptures, eroticism … these kinds of concerns. But now, suddenly, these concerns don't count anymore, because I have to fit that object into a narrative that is not about contemporary art. It's about someone who died and doesn't want to remember who he was. So the challenge is now: 'How can I fit this thing in?' In this sense, the object is going to write the book, or influence my writing.

And how would that exactly happen? Imagine that we have this piece, or pieces, in the show, and they are activated at times through the duration of the show. How do these actions exactly reflect in the writing process? They must affect the writing process somehow.

Let's imagine that these artworks are actually clues. In this case, the victim becomes the detective. And, suddenly, if he's facing an art object and he has to fit this art object in his biography, which he doesn't remember, so he investigates the object. And this is what will happen in the writing process. It's beyond art critics [laughs].

Also, there is this beautiful word in Russian, which is *ostranenie*. *Ostranenie*, in English, can be translated as uncanny. But I don't think that it's the right translation. In Italian we say *straniamento*.

Ostranenie is … a process that has been used a lot by Freud in psychotherapy. But, if I'm not wrong, it comes from writers. One of the first ones to speak about *ostranenie* in a popular way is of course Freud. It's the first time that he saw himself in a mirror, in a train, I think, or in a hotel. And he saw himself in a mirror without knowing that that was a mirror. So he saw another person that looked like him, but he didn't recognise himself. So this is the technique I want to use for my book, this *ostranenie*.

I'm also very interested in some of the pieces that are coming from your own dreams, like the door that plays with the flutes. I don't know if there are other pieces that are coming from your dreams?

It's quite weird, because [in the dream] I went to see this artist's studio. She's a friend of mine. Or not really, we are not really friends, but we know each other, more or less. We got into the studio and, in the dream, she was kind of flirting with me, you know, this kind of thing. In the dream she was flirty, I didn't understand, I was feeling guilty or something. And then she invited me in her studio, because there was a party, but the studio was the quietest place where we could talk about projects. So I'm going to the studio with her, and she opens the door, and then she asks me to close it. And when I close the door, the door makes a sound. And I was like: 'Oh, wow, this sound, it's fantastic! How is it possible that this door makes this sound?' So I start to play with the door. But she doesn't pay that much attention to me or the door. She's doing some other stuff with another sculpture, another object. And I say: 'Hey, this is fantastic.' And she says: 'Oh, really? I wanted to show it in my next exhibition, but I think it's just a crap piece.' And I say: 'No, but honestly, I was very close to make something like this.' And she says: 'Well, if you want it, you can take it.'

Then I got a little bit jealous, because I thought: 'I was very close to making something like this. And now she doesn't recognise that this is a fucking artwork. She's busy with some other stupid stuff.'

And then I woke up. And I thought: 'You know what? I'm going to get the door' [laughs].

But, in your dream, the door was the actual door to the studio?

It was the actual door to the studio. You know, in dreams you understand the narrative of the dream [he snaps his fingers]. I look at the door and she says just

one sentence and I understand the larger narrative. So the larger narrative was that she was trying to make a prototype, she had nowhere to hang the door, so she hung the door at the entrance to the studio. But this part of the narrative was not told. Neither by her nor by me. It was something that I knew when I dreamed it. Dreams have such a fantastic system of metanarrative … if only a book could have something like that it would be amazing.

Who would be your ideal reader? Somebody who also understands that the book is part of an art project? What would happen if somebody only reads the book?

I think that [the latter] would be my favourite reader. Of course, people who saw the show and stuff will recognise some codes, they will have more keys to open different doors. But I think I'd like it if the book is an object in itself. If all those metanarratives, or secret doors, or different layers open it will be good. But, otherwise, when you read the book there are so many other doors that you don't even need to know about the existence of the art. So I think the book must be a book.

Right. I was just thinking, because we already agreed on the publisher, which is an art book publisher, and their distribution network is quite tied to a kind of art audience, I was wondering, how possible would it be that someone from the art world would read it just as any novel?

Yes, the context probably influences the category of the reader. So you think we chose the wrong publisher [laughs]?

Not at all. But I was asking your opinion, because it creates a kind of readership, already, in a way. [Though] I'm sure that a lot of people could buy it anyway, not knowing about the art project.

But I also think that we selected more or less a publisher that has a huge distribution [network]. So, yes, of course, it's a publisher of contemporary art; yes, of course, people that look for novels to read look for other publishers, for sure. But this book, luckily, will be able to be found anywhere. I mean, in a specialised bookstore, of course. But now, even if you go to New York, or Paris, or Berlin, you find art books, and novels and poetry in the same bookstore.

But it's an interesting issue. It's true that the choice of the editor, of the publisher … I don't want to say it influences the novel. But [it does] in a way because if you have

certain readers they'll read the novel in a certain way. So the context also writes the book [laughs].

That's why I was asking about your ideal reader, about your ideal readership, and how you approach that.

I had this experience with the book with Book Works (Cecchetti, 2012). I really thought it was a book for art lovers. And then I found out that people who buy narrative fiction buy this book. I found articles online where people took this book as a short novel.

I don't know, we'll see [laughs]. You know, there's always a second edition, we can publish a second edition with Penguin Books. If it works, if it's good.

Yeah, like Tom McCarthy.

Yes, exactly, Tom McCarthy started with Metronome [Press]. And Metronome [Press] was an art publisher. And then he found his way to …

… a mainstream publisher.

Hollywood even bought the rights to make a film [based on his novel].

I believe that you want to write a novel because you want people to read it, so it has to be engaging, it has to read like a good work of narrative fiction. I believe that an editor can always be a very great help. I was wondering if you could tell me about the role of such editor in your particular project.

If everything goes the way we want it, the way we have discussed, I would like that this meeting with the editor would happen before the book is finished, in such a way that the editor will find himself in the position of a detective. In the sense that the plot twists, the plot curves, the narrative is not finished. He has to deal with something that is not finished. He has to deal with a plot that is not complete.

I don't want him to become the author of the book. Of course, I am the author. But I like this idea of a professional reader, because at the end an editor is this: a professional reader that has to deal also with his own imagination and his own expectations. It can be fun. And I'm not saying that I will use all his advice, or I will follow what he thinks or what he says, but it can be interesting to see this process – because I'm also very interested in breaking clichés.

Is that why you were thinking of using the editor's input in a performative way? As you know, the editor is usually a hidden figure in the writing process. But, in a performance, you are making an artistic choice, you are choosing to visualise this process.

Yes, about that moment I only have visions, like images. The first time we thought about it I was thinking of a more classical way to do it, with me reading pages of the book and the editor in the shadows, really in the darkness, like we would only see this dark silhouette. He would be doing corrections and then he would have read it in his own fashion. But I think that, in this case, it can be too much of a real working session. And I think it would be much better if, in the whole event, physicality would take over those words and language, correction and editing. So now I've visions of the editor that, with his hands, is moving parts of the text, deleting parts of the text. Really like in *Vanilla Sky*. Really moving parts of the text.

I don't know how we can do that … or how we can technically solve it. But it would be nice if, while I read the text of the chapter, you can see simultaneously, at my back, this guy moving and deleting. I don't know how we will do it, but we'll see. This is the image. Technically, I don't know.

Bert Danckaert is a Belgium artist based in Antwerp and author of the artist's novel *The Extras* (2016), which, together with the photography book *Simple Present* (2013) constitute the two parts of his PhD thesis (University of Tilburg). The interview was held on 2 February 2017.

[David Maroto:] **Your PhD thesis is composed of two parts: *The Extras* and *Simple Present*. Did you also submit a theoretical essay?**

[Bert Danckaert:] No, and there was absolutely no pressure … I was completely free. I could also, for instance, make an exhibition with work from myself or works from other people as the final presentation for the PhD. So I wasn't obliged to write. It was something that I chose myself, which of course is logical … because, of course, they asked, in some way, to [provide] a reflection on my methods, on how I work, how I came to what I did. You have to make that readable, or visible, so it can't just be the artworks themselves, it has to be some kind of reflection that can have any form you decide. That's something you have to work out in collaboration with your promoter [supervisor]. And that of course depends on which university you are connected with, and how flexible these people are, because most of them are quite strict.

How are the two publications articulated in the same research project?

They are complementary in the way that you read in the book: it's about a project that failed, a narrative of trying to photograph the décor of the Bollywood industry and everything goes wrong. I took this idea of failure, and the idea of ending with no picture at all as the starting point of reflection, because failure is of course an important element in the artistic process. So, the written essay, or the novel, is about the picture I couldn't make, so there is no illustration at all; it's only text about the absent image, if you want.

And then, on the other hand, there is the book *Simple Present*, the end result of five years of my artistic practice, without any letter or text. So that was the concept: to make a book about the absence of the image and to make a photo book without any explanation, the images are there and they just speak for themselves.

I see an artistic trajectory that goes from the impossibility of producing the desired image to the use of imagination in the artist's novel. Was this the reason that motivated writing a novel as (part of) your PhD thesis?

When I experienced this Bollywood adventure, I didn't really know that I was going to write a book about it. But it was such an intense experience. And it was during that trip when I was in India that I decided to use this, to use this frustration also, to turn it into something positive, to turn it into something creative, artistic, which writing is, of course.

It's also what I write about in the book. The idea of aikido, where you use the negative energy of an attacker, and you use that negative power to turn it around. So you don't have to use your own energy, you just use the energy you get to turn it into something positive.

For you, whose job is the creation of images … when I was reading your novel I couldn't see the image, it's absent, it's failed, but I could *imagine* the setting, I could imagine the characters. So, in a way, I was creating an image, but through imagination. I was wondering if that was also in your head, the use of imagination to replace an image that doesn't exist.

Yeah, of course. The whole idea of describing your method and all the references I make to artists that I admire, or that I have problems with, or whatever, is to create this kind of mental idea of what your work is about without actually showing it. And then, of course, you can take the photo book and there you can see what it is, but it's not necessary.

Of course, in the novel there is the story about the desire to photograph the décor and that's just a narrative, but there's much more about a reflection on my work in general. And that of course is directly connected to the photo book. But, of course, in the photo book there is not one image of the décor or the film industry, because that failed.

Did you have references to other similar alternatives to a conventional academic essay?

Not really, no. The whole thing that I described about research in arts was, and still is, something quite new. And we still don't really know how to do it. And maybe it's not even a good idea to do it; who knows. But it exists and you try to find your way.

It was very organic the way that I just reacted on impulses, but there wasn't really an example for me to be like 'I want to make a book like that one', or 'I have read so many books by artists', which wasn't the case. I like writing myself, so I thought it's a natural, logical way of expressing what I do, next to my visual work.

When you were in Mumbai, the idea of writing a novel wasn't in your head yet?

I was struggling with how I was going to finish this project. And then I had that experience, and then during that trip I decided 'OK, I will write a subjective, novel-like essay where I can reflect on my work without being the art historian or the art philosopher', because that would have felt very uncomfortable and pretentious. So I was looking for an honest and subjective way to describe what I do and that's also the reason why I took failure as a starting point, not to write about your big successes but more about the struggle and what goes on in your mind. And that's what it's all about, I guess, the whole process.

So you worked from your personal memories. Did you take notes?

No. Although it's autobiographical and it really happened, a lot of the story is invented. Or I took it from other encounters with people. For instance, there is somebody on the film set who's describing how Indian people have dirty feet, and the whole story about that situation. It's something that didn't happen on the film set, but it happened somewhere else, not even in India, it was somebody talking about India. So, in a way, everything in the novel is true, but it's like asking whether a photograph true to reality? Or, is the novel true to what really happened? Of course not. You work with it. But I didn't lie [laughs].

Did writing in a narrative fictional mode influence the research? If yes, how?

It definitely influenced my research – whatever the research is, because, what is research? Is it the writing, or is it making images, or …? I think that the whole project intensified both my photography and my writing and my thinking, and the whole reflection on being an artist, and on the work of other artists. So there is a lot of influence there but mostly I think intensification.

From the viewpoint of both artist and researcher I consider writing the ideal space where theory and practice can meet. I was wondering about your view on the relation between writing research and your art practice.

I've always been writing. Since I was a student I liked to order my thoughts by writing. It was just for myself. And then, later, I started to write for an art magazine, which was more of a reflection on the work of others. For me teaching is a way to think about art, writing is a way, and of course doing it is a way. And these three help each other in a very positive way. So writing has always been part of my practice. And, of course, also taking distance to it and thinking about it, but also being in the middle of it and trying to describe that bubble you are in.

I am thinking of the life that the novel has now on its own. To read it you don't need to know that it was part of a PhD, so it has a second life. When did you decide about this? Was it clear for you while you were writing that it could be published afterwards?

Maybe it's pretentious, but when you write something you want people to read it. It's not just a dissertation for your defence and then you put in your drawer. And, also, Jan Blommart [my supervisor], encouraged me. He had this contact with EPO publishers, because he published many books there, and he brought me in contact with them. They read it and they liked it, and then it was just a matter of talking about budget. It appeared actually before my defence. The book appeared in Dutch in 2013, and I defended it in 2014. And now in 2016 there's an English translation, which is part of the B.O.F. project, with a philosopher from the university. So I'm quite happy. The Dutch book was rather successful, I had a few good reviews and people were reacting very positively. Also, people who are doing a PhD and are struggling with 'How do I do a report, or reflect?' I got a lot of good reactions from that perspective but also from the academic world, where they said 'Oh, finally there's a PhD that reads very easily and is not very heavy and very pretentious'. And now I am waiting for the reactions to the English [translation], because I have no idea, how Americans, for instance, who are quite a different culture, will respond to it.

Łukasz Gorczyca is an art critic and the director of Raster Gallery in Warsaw. He did not attend any of the events during the *Tamam Shud* art project but read the *Tamam Shud* artist's novel. The interview was held on 23 February 2018.

[David Maroto:] **Can you tell me about your overall experience reading *Tamam Shud*?**

[Łukasz Gorczyca:] It started quite well, I felt involved, and then I was slowly losing my way, somehow, like getting into a trap, or a maze (there was a story about a maze, as well). I felt kind of alone. And I'm not sure if I get it, in the end.

Was it an enjoyable read?

Yes, at the beginning, the first part I really enjoyed, somehow. There was still the tricky idea of a certain investigation, so there was a certain promise that something will develop and will touch on the mystery, or whatever. But then it was getting more and more psychedelic, in a way. So that simple track became much more complicated. And also, I think in terms of the language, it became much more complex, because it became denser and denser – there are more fake characters, and so on. It was like getting slowly into a forest: at first it is like a young forest and you can understand its structure, and then it's getting weirder, more natural, denser. And then, at the very end, you say 'OK, I'm lost'. This is my metaphor.

Was the end of the novel satisfactory?

Let me answer as a kind of regular reader. I understand we're now discussing my feelings, or my emotions.

Yes, in a way it's also about how you feel, if at the end you feel like: 'OK, it pays off the time I invested in reading it.'

I was a bit in a rush reading it, to be honest, but I'd say that at the very beginning there was a certain promise that you're into the book, into the story, and then, later on, as you go deeper into it, you are getting more aware, more conscious, of the fact that it's not really a regular novel. You get into this kind of weird psychedelic narration, and maybe there's even some weird artist behind it. So it becomes more about the reader's experience than about the narration itself, you're taken to a certain performative experience.

This is not like a regular novel, it's not like I'm going to a movie theatre and I'm going to see a regular movie with a regular plot. No, now I'm going into an experimental cinema, and I'm going to enjoy it as well, because I'm interested in a kind of, let's say, avant-garde art. So this is a more general remark: there is a certain point at the beginning when there's a more promising narration, plot, and then it goes into a sort of art writing.

I'm not into literature, I'm not a professional reader, so I can't really map it, somehow. I can't say it's on this or another level. It doesn't resonate in the sense that I'm not really well oriented in contemporary literature. This is my very simple, very naïve reflection. It's a pure reader's experience.

That's what I'm actually interested to learn. So, would you define *Tamam Shud* as a murder mystery novel?

I wish, I wish [laughs]. I would agree with that; however, it's not really like a classical one, right? Because it doesn't really lead to any conclusion.

What do you think about the changes in tone? Or rather, the rhythm in the tone: sometimes it's very humorous, then there are passages that are more dramatic, and then it goes back to a more light-hearted tone.

I think it's rather well done, in the sense that this is the type of text where you really use language to build up the plot, [although] the development of the plot is not very clearly constructed, it's rather about experience. I think it's nice in terms of how language works with time. It's fine; I like it, somehow.

Were you aware that *Tamam Shud* is part of an art project?

It's not that I am against it or afraid of it. I know that it is a kind of art project, in a way, but this is more about a very simple classification. It's not like a novel-novel, in terms of classical structure, a novel that could be probably distributed as mainstream literature. No, it's rather something else, right? Using a very basic description: it's more experimental.

Do you think it's relevant to have this knowledge (of the novel being part of an art project) in order to read it?

I thought about it, or maybe not exactly this question, but something similar; put it in these words: if you ask me if there's anything in the novel that you could recognise

as something linked to the artist's kind of expression or imagination, I'd say no, not necessarily. I wouldn't necessarily link it with the fact that the author is an artist. I mean, I don't really know, I didn't think about it this way. I took it as a book to read, right? I can't see any strangeness or any weakness in this text related to the fact that the author may be a visual artist. This is literature, as I say, maybe more experimental, but it's nothing very special or significant that I would then need the excuse: 'OK, that was made by an artist.'

What kind of reader do you think *Tamam Shud* is written for: art insider or casual reader?

I think this is a book written because the author likes to write. It's this type of literature, I'd say. If you write a novel, you don't really think who you are addressing it to – except for the type of literature you have for a very specific kind of people, like very commercial stuff, like cheap romances, or like historical novels. But this is like a typical novel made by a guy who has the will to express himself, or herself, using the medium of literature, and doesn't really care [about] the readers.

So, coming back to your question: the potential audience is art people, but not necessarily in terms of people related to the visual arts, but art people who are generally interested in art: people interested in contemporary literature, theatre, people who are open enough to try to read something which is not really like a linear story, with a simple plot, whatever. I wouldn't really call it a novel for the guys from the visual arts; I'd say it is just for guys interested in contemporary and cutting-edge kind of expression.

Do you have the feeling that you were missing part of a larger project by not having attended the performances or the exhibition?

I don't know. I don't know anything about these performances, honestly. So I don't know if I missed something. I don't know what you're asking about [laughs]. This is the book itself, I mean, if there's any secret story behind it, or any additional action behind it, of course it may change my feelings and transform it [the reading experience] into a more complex experience. But, as for now, I took it as a kind of regular reading, so I didn't think about this way, that there was something behind it. I mean, I didn't think that there was something behind it, because I took it as a [normal] text.

Do you think it is possible to read *Tamam Shud* just as a regular novel? In other words, do you think it stands as a work of narrative fiction in its own right, without any ties to any artistic discourse?

Sure, yes.

Would you recommend reading *Tamam Shud* to a friend?

I thought about recommending it to Payam [Sharifi], from Slavs and Tatars. This is the way you recommend books, at least try to appreciate somebody else's effort and time. First of all, I'm not an obsessive book or movie consumer, I don't have so much stuff to recommend, but if I do some sort of recommendation I do it for a certain reason, because there's something special in the book which I link, somehow, by intuition, with another person. So I always prefer to recommend something that I know will resonate with that other person, for some reason.

I wouldn't recommend it to all my colleagues, or clients in the gallery – it'd be unsuccessful in a way – but yes, I think I can find a few people I can recommend it to, sure. And then maybe we're coming back to the previous questions: these people I would recommend it to would mostly be art people. Like Payam, it was the very first thought.

I don't know if you have any final remarks, or something you feel you should say and I didn't ask.

My general feeling is that this is really like, well, like a real book. Actually, quite long, I'd say, even. It is quite substantial. And the whole idea is quite involving. But it'd be nice to have some extra drugs to use [laughs].

Jan Jasiński attended several events during the *Tamam Shud* project (episodes 1, 3, 4, and the exhibition) and read the *Tamam Shud* artist's novel. The interview was held on 23 February 2018.

[David Maroto:] **After reading *Tamam Shud*, does it resonate, whole or in part, with anything that you saw, heard, or experienced during the art project?**

[Jan Jasiński:] Partially, yes. Especially the first part, it has a lot of references to the performances I've seen. To be honest, the last part differs a lot; there are a lot of things that haven't been part of the performances I've seen. That part was the most difficult to read for me – to understand the plot, the things that are happening, that are going on. In terms of the main plot, because the main character is looking for the person who killed him, and in the first and second parts the plot is quite clear, and in the third one there are a lot of things that appear and a lot of characters that were not present in the two previous parts; they appear suddenly, just like that. I can't get along with the plot.

Are there any passages in the artist's novel that reminded you of a specific moment of the art project?

Yes, for example, the Tarot. I remember very clearly the performance where Alex was using his cards to find out what happens, when he was engaging the people attending the performance to make the plot, to try to create it (Cecchetti, 2017a). That part is the one I recognise the most, because I clearly remember what happened. I can even hear his voice saying the same things, so when I'm reading this book it is like listening to Alex, really. I'm not sure if you understand me, I mean that I can clearly say that the author I saw during the performance is the one that wrote this book.

Do you think that having attended the art project made your reading experience better, or more complete, than any other casual reader who isn't aware of it?

A bit, yes, but you can also read this book without attending the performances. You can go with the flow of the book; you can just [try to] understand the plot, though you can imagine more when you attended the performances. Which may be good, but it makes things limited. For example, when thinking of the performances in your

imagination, it's limiting: you can only imagine the things that happened during the performances and that can be good, but it can also not be as well.

Alright, my question was if it made your experience more complete, or it expanded your experience but, in a way, what you're saying is that it limits it because it links to a particular memory, right?

Yes. Well, participating in the performances makes things easier, for sure.

In what sense?

In the sense of going through the book, reading it. You understand more than when you didn't attend the performances. [When] things that are described here were not part of the performances, as for example the third part, which for me was very complicated, I still don't know … there are a lot of plots, a lot of characters, a lot of digressions, and I still don't know who killed [the protagonist].

I still have some thoughts about this. For example, the detectives, who are mentioned in the book, I don't know if they are alive in the first part, or if they are ghosts. I'm not sure about this. The third part is not clear for me.

Was the end of the novel satisfactory?

Well, I think it needs a bit of an upgrade, in my opinion.

Could you be more specific?

I mean the characters, the boy who's playing the organ, he appears, suddenly, and the detectives also, they move through time, they move from one space to another, you don't know how it happens, you don't know why. For example, I remember the scene in the museum, when they decide to lie down on the floor and just look at the sculptures – there's no logic here for me.

Would you define *Tamam Shud* as a murder mystery novel?

In my opinion, it starts as such a novel but, at the end, the author misses his own plot. At the end, the murder is a bit lost, somewhere, and you're more focused on emotions, on thoughts of the author as a ghost. So I'd still define it as a murder mystery but for me, in the third part, the theme of the murder goes missing. The first and the second parts are like a murder mystery novel, but the third one is missing something, so it can't really be called one.

What kind of reader do you think *Tamam Shud* is written for: art insider or casual reader?

Definitely for art insiders. Definitely. Because I'm not an art insider (maybe partially, but more from time to time) and it's very difficult to read this book when you don't know the references, you don't know things like Gilgamesh, or *Tamam Shud*. For me it was something new that I had to check and ask Sara[50] what's going on, what's this. I think this is a book definitely dedicated to people who are art insiders and know something more, know these references I mentioned.

Do you think that some of these references were delivered through the art project? I am going back now to the previous question: your point of view as somebody who has experienced all these references during the performances, as opposed to somebody who wouldn't get them. Were these references playing in your mind while you were reading?

It's something different when you're attending the performances because, when I was attending the three or four performances with Alex it was like I was putting my attention on something … I saw more. [In the artist's novel] for example, I didn't notice his green bow tie, which was very typical for the performance, and people noticed it, I'm sure about this. Here there are not so many details as there were during the performances, as we could see then. Here, the spiritual part of the story, I mean his thoughts, are described. Doing the performances was a kind of a show, sometimes he was improvising, sometimes he was just entertaining people, and here he's more focused on the plot, more focused on himself.

Going back to your question: I think the book is for art insiders, but the performances could be attended by casual readers. However, during the performances, they could feel attracted by the theme, by the issues that are described by the performer, Alex, the author of this book, and they can try to read this, and I'm sure that these parts that they saw during the performances will be easier to understand, to imagine, to put the events that are described into the correct order so that they can understand the story, than for people who didn't attend any performance.

[50] Sara Szostak, his partner and assistant in some the *Tamam Shud* performances and exhibition.

If I understand correctly, on the one hand you think that having attended part of the project kind of helps you to understand the artist's novel.

Yes.

But, at the same time, you mentioned earlier that it also limits your imagination, right?

Yeah, it's like the difference between watching the film adaptation of a book and reading the book. When at first you watch a movie, and then you read the book that the film is based on, then your imagination is limited, you are limited. For example, when you attend the performance and you see all these things, when you talk to Alex, or get to know him better, it may make things more limited, I think.

Do you think it is possible to read *Tamam Shud* just as a regular novel? In other words, do you think it stands as a work of narrative fiction in its own right, without any ties to any artistic discourse?

Well, I don't think so. I think you need to know these references to understand everything. Because there are a lot of metaphors here I just couldn't understand and decipher. I think you should know these metaphors to understand it fully, because when you don't know them, you're just looking from point A to point B, as I was trying to do when I started this book. I knew that the author was killed and I was trying to get to know who did it. And all those things that were between point A and point B were a bit disturbing for me. There were moments when I lost my concentration, I couldn't focus on the plot because there were a lot of digressions and a lot of metaphors and, suddenly, something happened that was connected to the main plot. So it was a bit disturbing for me.

Do you think, in retrospect, that having read the artist's novel alters the interpretation, or the perception that you had of, for example, the installations that you saw in the exhibition?

No, I don't think so. It was a much stronger impression, attending the events, installations, and performances. It makes a more powerful impression than reading. It's very connected with the thing I said about limitations. I watched it, I saw things that the artist describes here, I have quite a clear picture in my mind. Sure, it's described, but I still read this book and I see those screens, those situations, moments that were part of the performances.

Would you recommend reading *Tamam Shud* to a friend?

I would recommend it, but I would read it again, I'd have to do it once, and once again, I think, to understand everything, and to do it more slowly. I'd need more time to do it, because you can't read this by sitting and reading it at once. You have to read from one point to another point and give yourself a bit of time to understand and put everything into a greater order. Then I'd go back to another part of the book. But I'd definitely recommend it. I'm curious about the effect of your research, and I'm curious about the result of giving this book to a casual reader and his impressions about it. I think that, for people who didn't see the performances, who don't know Alex and his craziness, this book may look like a crazy piece, really.

I was wondering if there was something else that rang a bell in your mind when you were reading the artist's novel and you connected with the art project?

Something important happened during the performance in the garden (Cecchetti, 2017b). I really regret that I couldn't participate in that performance because I think, if I had been there, I could maybe understand what happens because, really, right now, I'm not sure if the main character was poisoned or not. What happened, I don't know. Probably, if I had attended the performance in the botanical garden, I would know more, I'd probably understand it a bit better than right now.

It's very interesting listening to how you connect things. I'm just missing some references from the exhibition, some of the installations, or things that you heard or saw, whether they resonate.

You know, the [Erotic] Cabinet that was part of the exhibition with all those paintings by him – I couldn't see the reference between that part of the project and the book. I couldn't see this thing here. I don't remember this part of the exhibition. But the reference to the boy playing the piano and the boy playing the organ was quite clear to me. When I was reading about this boy playing the organ I saw that scene, I saw those big screens full of paintings, full of colours. It was the reference, the picture that I saw with my eyes and, when I was reading this book, I saw it clearly there.

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